精霊使いの剣舞 15

ブレイドダンス

ドラクニアの竜王

志瑞祐

Illustration
仁村有志

キャラクター原案
桜はんぺん

カミトに覆い被さったまま、
レオノーラは、
視線をわずかに逸らした。
「ひとつ、お願いを聞くと
いいましたね……」
「え……」
レオノーラは恥ずかしそうに
耳もとに口を寄せた。
Leonora Lancaster
レオノーラ・ランカスター

Claire Rouge
クレア・ルージュ
現れたのは――
焔の髪をたなびかせる少女だった。
四肢に纏う焔は
絶えず荒れ狂う。
紅玉よりもなお紅い、
灼熱の瞳。
Orlinde
オルトリンデ
「〈灼銀の戦姫（スカーレット・ヴァルキリー）〉――オルトリンデ、
真名を呼ぶ声に応え、現界しました」

精霊使いの剣舞15

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Prologue

In a wilderness under the moonlit night—

"It seems like you still have a bad habit of *sticky fingers*, lad."

The witch spoke, looking down on the boy crawling on the ground.

"Do you intend to offer such a unspectacular blade dance to the Elemental Lords?"

"...S-Shut... up, witch..."

Coughing up chunks of blood, the young man got up to a crouch. He—Kamito—was holding a sword with a blade the color of darkness.

He had resolved himself to never let go of his sword no matter how many times he was sent sprawling.

"Oh? Looks like you still have enough strength to talk back."

Tilting the corners of her lips in a grin, she mercilessly kicked the collapsed Kamito in the belly.

"...Gah... Huff—"

"—Stand up. One more time."

Kamito stood up unsteadily, glaring at the woman in return.

Greyworth Ciel Mais—formerly the premier knight of the Ordesia Empire's Numbers.

Known by her nickname as the Dusk Witch, she was the strongest elementalist on the continent.

(Monster...)

While wiping blood from his mouth, he thought to himself.

There was an elementalist nicknamed the "Monster" back at the Institutional School, but the woman standing with a cold expression before him was the genuine article.

Kamito began to get serious, not daring to take things lightly, not even letting a single gasp escape.

"Wait, no matter what, this is going too far!"

An adorable voice came out of thin air.

The source of this voice was the jet-black sword in Kamito's hand.

...As though expressing the extent of her anger, black lightning was exploding intensely around the blade.

"I won't let him die. Don't coddle the lad too much, darkness spirit."

Ignoring the voice of protest, the witch walked over and pulled out a demon sword stabbed in the wilderness.

"Don't worry, Restia, I can still go on."

Kamito quietly muttered and poured divine power into his jet-black sword.

"You rely on the darkness spirit's power too much. You won't be able to beat the projected winner of the Blade Dance, the Holy Kingdom's Luminaris, like this."

"Doesn't matter. Even if I have to face a holy spirit, there is no one who can win against me and Restia."

Glaring at Greyworth before him, Kamito replied.

This was an expression of absolute trust in his partner, the darkness spirit.

Responding to the boy's thoughts, black lightning exploded in the wilderness.

"Now that's quite some confidence."

Greyworth grinned mercilessly and readied her demon sword.

"First of all, let me shatter that baseless confidence."

Despite her effortless stance, Kamito could not find any opening at all. Compared to the likes of practitioners of assassination skills at the Instructional School whom he had always faced off against, or the Empire's spirit knights, she was seriously in a completely different league.

"What's the matter? Just attack any time you like."

"...!"

Kamito stepped forward.

Rather than falling for the witch's taunt, Kamito had come to understand that searching for an opening would be futile.

"Assassination technique—Shadow Crossing!"

He closed in instantly to unleash a slash with godlike speed.

No petty tricks, hence this was pure skill in perfect execution. However—

"I see, this skill's speed and accuracy are impeccable."

The witch jeered. The sword of guaranteed death, carrying the entirety of Kamito's thirteen years of experience, could not reach the witch's throat. She had dodged by the slimmest of margins.

"It's not over! Haphazard Dance of the Flying Snake!"

Taking a further step forward, Kamito released countless slashes in succession while his gaze followed her intensely.

"Oh? So the strike of guaranteed death was just a diversion and you're using a who knows how much inferior skill to target my life instead?"

Greyworth spun around and dodged the countless flashes of the sword in the air.

However, that was precisely Kamito's goal.

Given the timing, using defensive magic was impossible.

Kamito concentrated divine power on the blade of his demon sword.

"Go forth and pierce, all-annihilating demon lightning of punishment—Vorpal Blast!"

Erupting from the demon sword's blade, jet-black lightning exploded, cracking the ground in its wake.

(—*It hit*!)

With that, having unleashed a decisive strike, he jumped into the cloud of rising dust and smoke, but at that moment...

Instantly, he felt a chill.

(...What the hell!?)

Kamito's feet stopped instantly. No, rather than Kamito's conscious intent, his nerves had forcibly commanded his body to stop moving due to instinctive fear of the unknown.

"Well done, lad—"

From the dust, he heard a voice.

There was something decisively different about the witch's voice from what he was used to hearing.

"Even back in that age, there were only a handful of people capable of soiling me with dust. My goodness, you truly delight me..."

The dust cloud dissipated. Under the bright moonlight, *that* appearance came into view.

"This is the second time for you to witness this appearance—"

Chapter 1 - Dusk at the Imperial Capital

Part 1

The falling rain was like mist at the imperial capital. At this location, buried under a great deal of debris from the destruction wrought by the gravity spirit belonging to Leschkir Hirschkilt of the Numbers—

She stood there like a shadow.

"...mito-kun... Kamito-kun!"

Fianna's voice sounded like it was coming from far away.

Ouch, what happened? For a moment, Kamito's thoughts could not keep up.

No, it would be better to say that he already understood, yet his brain refused to admit the truth before his eyes.

While his hand was pressed against the laceration on his abdomen, blood seeped out between his fingers and dripped. Ren Ashdoll's power that previously filled his entire body had vanished completely. His body temperature was also falling.

(I totally failed to see it...)

Let alone the flash of the sword, he had not even been able to see the motion at all.

However, Kamito knew that sword technique, a sword strike as swift as lightning.

Absolute Blade Arts, First Form—Purple Lightning.

...Inconceivable.

Apart from Kamito, there should be no one else who had inherited *her* sword skills.

However, that flash, that accuracy, everything was superior to Kamito's.

While pondering the question of her identity, he had already noticed this fact.

Precisely because he noticed it, he refused to admit it.

But—

"Well well, even though I held back, dodging this skill is still beyond you—"

"...!"

Amid the mist-like rain, that calm voice pulled Kamito's thoughts back to reality definitively.

The *young maiden* shook off the blood on the blade and mercilessly looked down at Kamito who was kneeling on the ground.

"Greyworth..."

Kamito groaned and forced that name out from his lips.

Greyworth Ciel Mais—The Dusk Witch.

"Why... Why *are you here*!?"

Kamito cried out hoarsely.

According to intel from the special operative knight, Virrey, who had served as a guide for Kamito and the others, Greyworth was imprisoned at the notorious torture tower of Guas Gibai after falling into Arneus' hands.

If that were true, she could not possibly be here.

No, before considering that, *this appearance* of hers was—

"Why... Gah...!"

"Kamito-kun!"

Fianna frantically caught Kamito's unsteady body.

"What is going on? About *that girl* being the Academy's headmistress..."

Fianna must have recalled the whisper she had overheard earlier.

Her question was not illogical, because the girl currently standing before their eyes—

Her appearance was that of a lovely maiden, the same age as Fianna.

The moniker of the Dusk Witch was widely known across the continent. No matter what, the time when she had been active on the battlefield was already decades ago.

Fianna could not possibly have known what she looked like back then.

On the other hand, Kamito had previously witnessed the witch in her prime on two occasions.

The first was during his attempt to assassinate her in her room while the next was when learning the first move of the Absolute Blade Arts, Purple Lightning, at a wilderness outside the imperial capital.

Greyworth had mentioned before that divine power would increase to extreme heights when the power of the Elemental Lords influenced the human realm.

During such occasions, her body would regain its youth, allowing her to recover her peak power for a short duration—

The lovely maiden's gorgeous body was getting wet from the drizzle.

That young face could easily be mistaken for a little girl's.

However, held in her hand was a bloodstained demon sword. One could also sense chilling beauty from her figure, standing there quietly.

"—That's right, she's Greyworth."

Kamito told Fianna.

Of course, it was possible to alter one's appearance by using a mimicry spirit's power. However, given her flash of the sword earlier with godlike speed, it was undoubtedly Absolute Blade Arts. Compared to a fake like Sjora Kahn, it was only a completely different level.

"Greyworth..."

Feeling despair, Kamito called out that name again.

The blood flowing out of his flank went all over his fingers.

Something must have happened at the tower of Guas Gibai where she had been imprisoned, Kamito surmised. Mind control through magic, brainwashing by using drugs, or perhaps something even more creepy—What should he do? It did not seem like he could make her normal again just by calling her name.

However, even so—

Given she was that *witch*, Kamito called out, clinging to a shred of hope.

"Have you forgotten about me, your student? Don't tell me that the a woman of your level, the fearsome Dusk Witch, has been brainwashed?"

Kamito shouted. However, the young girl's gray eyes simply looked down on him emotionlessly.

"Ku..."

Kamito stabbed the Demon Slayer into the ground and slowly stood up. The blood spilling from his wound formed a puddle at his feet.

"Kamito-kun, your wound is still—!"

"Don't worry... about it."

If words could not reach her, then there was only one language to communicate.

Readying the Demon Slayer, Kamito stared intently at the witch before him.

"Oh? You're standing up just like that—"

The witch who looked like a young girl whispered as though impressed, then raised her crimson demon sword.

Compared to the pitch-black demon sword that was her personal weapon of choice, it was different in both shape and color. However,

the terrifying and ominous feeling left no doubt that it belonged to a demon spirit.

—Compared to that time...

"Fufu, you are heavily injured, Onii-chan."

A young girl's voice, as adorable as the sound of bells, resounded in the imperial capital's dimming sky.

"...!?"

Kamito looked up.

Amid the hazy curtain of rain—

A girl was hovering midair, smiling innocently.

Her appearance was that of a young girl age twelve or thirteen.

Beneath her glittering blonde hair was an eye of mysterious violet. Dressed in sacred vestments of pure white, she was holding a silver crosier that served as proof of a high-ranked cardinal of the Holy Kingdom.

Also, her left eye was covered by a crude eyepatch.

"It's you...!"

Millennia Sanctus—The girl with Otherworldly Darkness residing in her left eye.

She was the mastermind who had caused spirits to rampage and brought Areishia Spirit Academy to the brink of destruction.

The young girl chuckled and silently descended onto the rubble.

"...Tsk, I see now. You must the ones abetting Arneus."

Fianna glared at the girl and said.

"Oh my, don't make it sound so bad. It would be better to say it is what your dear brother wished for. We simply provided a bit of help."

The girl shrugged lightly in an adorable manner.

"Be that as it may, he is an incompetent man to begin with, not even able to lock a captured bird inside a cage. In that case, it might be more reliable to have you as a puppet, given how capable you are. Hey, Fianna-chan, it is not too late. Why don't you become our friend?"

"Sorry, I decline. Is there any point in becoming friends?"

"I see, what a shame—"

Millennia turned her head to look at Kamito who was standing in a pool of blood.

"Fufu, the strongest blade dancer, Ren Ashbell—Even for one such as you, in front of the Witch, you are no different from an infant."

"Are you the one who brainwashed Greyworth?"

Kamito growled with incisive killing intent.

However, Millennia snickered without any fear at all.

"We don't do anything as useless as the likes of brainwashing. We simply liberated the Witch that existed within her from the start. Ah, however, I see... Onii-chan, you may not know this. *Twenty-four years ago, what kind of wish she had sought from the Elemental Lords*—"

"What?"

—The wish Greyworth had sought.

Kamito did not know what exactly she meant by that.

Was she simply going for obfuscation to confuse them? Or perhaps—

(...No. What I should be thinking about now is how to get out of here.)

Kamito glanced at Fianna beside him.

The effects of Save the Queen had vanished already and Fianna looked very exhausted.

This was only natural—Having been locked away in a prison-like environment, her physical condition was surely very weak. Rather, it

was already a miracle that she was able to escape here on her own feet.

(...It's definitely not possible to fight while defending Fianna.)

Kamito calmly pondered strategies for breaking out of the predicament. He was currently facing a monumental challenge that he did not know if he could overcome even by pitting his full strength—

"Fianna, do you know the imperial capital's escape route?"

Kamito spoke up.

Fianna was supposed to know about escape routes exclusive to royals—Rubia had said so as the one who had devised the rescue operation.

Without Virrey's assistance, it was not possible to escape through the underground ruins that they had used to get here. Breaking out by force would be even more impossible with the Imperial Knights as the enemy.

"Yes, I do indeed know about the passage exclusive for royal use."

Since she had considered that route back during the prison escape stage, she could immediately answer.

"What are the chances that it's sealed off?"

Kamito asked. Since Arneus was a member of the royal family like Fianna, it was only natural for him to know of the escape route's existence. It would not be unusual for him to have already sent people there.

However, Fianna shook her head lightly.

"No, I believe it will be fine. That passage is absolutely not available for him. Hence, its existence would likely not occur to him."

"...Not available?"

Kamito felt puzzled but there was no time to ask.

"Fianna, go back to the earlier place to meet up with Claire and Ellis."

"What about you, Kamito-kun?"

"I will hold them off here."

"What—"

"Hurry and do me the favor of going. I can't protect you while I'm fighting."

Kamito forcibly pushed her away.

"..."

Hearing his words, Fianna—

She bit her lip hard and stood up unsteadily.

Hesitating here would make her Kamito's burden instead, concluded Fianna.

"Then I am going first. I will be waiting for you."

"Yeah, thanks."

Fianna drew up to Kamito's ear and whispered.

"Underneath the biggest bell tower in the *nobles district*, the small temple of Michaela."

"Got it. I'll head over soon."

Kamito nodded. Fianna went towards the streets while dragging one leg.

"Fufu, are you done talking?"

Millennia spoke up.

"Sorry, did I make you wait?"

"Yes. You are her one and only opponent who has learned the same sword skills as this woman. Perfect for testing purposes. With that burden gone, you'll be able to fight all-out, right?"

"...Then how about waiting until my wounds are healed?"

Kamito said while pressing on the wound in his flank.

"Nice try, but hasn't it healed already?"

"...So you have been paying attention."

Kamito forced a smile. Leaking out, miasma of darkness had sped up the healing of the puncture wound. No, rather than speeding up the healing—It was more like regeneration.

(...Looks like my body is already a complete monster's...)

He mentally poked fun at himself.

However, now was the time when he must rely on this monstrous power.

Kamito instantly looked behind him and moved.

Fianna had disappeared from view far off into the other end of the road.

Right now, he must buy time for Fianna to escape, even if just a short duration—

While Kamito was thinking that, Millennia chuckled.

"Oh dear, who said the little bird is allowed to escape?"

"...What!?"

"If she were to run off, that foolish king would make a big a fuss."

Millennia looked down at the rubble underfoot. Discovering Leschkir Hirschkilt who had been struck down by Kamito, she grinned.

"Ah yes, let me send out this useless piece of trash."

"What the—"

"Awaken, my puppet."

Saying that, Millennia stepped on the collapsed Numbers knight's head—

Slowly, she took off the eyepatch over her left eye.

This left eye was inhabited by the Otherworldly Darkness that was capable of corrupting even the Elemental Lords.

(...What?)

From her left eye, the viscous darkness melted and dripped to cover up the Numbers knight's face.

Suddenly, Leschkir Hirschkilt's body twitched violently while strange moans slipped out of her mouth.

"...Ah... Gaga... Ga-ah, gagagaga..."

Bathed in Otherworldly Darkness, Leschkir slowly rose up like a ghost and moved mechanically like a broken puppet.

(...What the hell!?)

Seeing the terrifying phenomenon before his eyes, Kamito held his breath involuntarily.

"Go chase down the Second Princess for me, puppet. It's fine even if you kill her."

Millennia pointed in the direction Fianna had escaped.

In that very instant...

"...Ah... The Second... Princess... Fiannaaaaaaaaa!"

Two black spheres appeared over Leschkir's head.

The gravity spirit that Kamito had bifurcated earlier still had yet to be fully destroyed.

(Crap—!)

Sword in hand, Kamito rushed over, but it was too late. Reversing the gravity field in its surroundings, the gravity spirit allowed Leschkir to float up into the air while laughing madly. Then her body flew along a ridiculous route in the direction of Fianna's escape.

As much as Kamito wanted to chase her—

"Your opponent is me—"

Standing before him with a crimson demon sword gripped in her hand was Greyworth.

Part 2

"Huff, huff, huff, huff—"

Fianna ran desperately along the rain splattered stone-paved road.

The intense sound of swords clashing resounded behind her. Fianna could not cast away her concern for Kamito, but she still did everything she could to believe in Kamito and suppress these thoughts. Aiming for the shrine where the escape passage was located, she ran and stumbled.

However, she was about to reach her limit.

Intense pain was circulating around her ankle as though it were burning.

Unable to maintain balance, Fianna fell into a puddle. Ripped in the process, her tattered dress of pure white became tainted by the color of mud.

"...Guh..."

She tried her best to suppress her moaning voice. If she allowed a scream to escape here, the Imperial Knights nearby would immediately discover her.

Fortunately, no residents of the nobles district were in sight, thanks to the evacuation order.

(How terrible—)

Her ankle was red and swollen.

She must have sprained it during the gravity spirit's attack. Enduring the pain, she had run here forcibly, but she could not even stand up now.

"O holy light of healing, treat this wound—"

Fianna pressed on her ankle lightly with her fingers and chanted healing spirit magic.

However, the faint light produced at her fingertips rapidly faded.

Due to her extreme depletion of holiness, it was impossible to fully utilize even magic of this level.

(...In that case, the likes of summoning Georgios would definitely be out of the question.)

She sighed lightly. The divine power that had rampaged within her like a storm just earlier was completely gone already.

(What on earth was that divine power I received from Kamito-kun...?)

While recalling Kamito's tight embrace along with the kiss, she touched her lips gently with her fingertips.

The heat from that kiss felt as though it was still lingering faintly there...

Her first kiss with the target of her affections. However, the kiss was wholly forced by circumstance. Surely Kamito himself thought nothing of it...?

(W-What am I thinking about at such a time?)

Fianna blushed and shook her head intensely.

If she listened closely, the acute noise of clashing blades could still be heard from afar.

(Kamito-kun...)

Her worried feelings were virtually tearing her chest apart.

Naturally, she knew of Kamito's great strength.

However, his opponent was that Dusk Witch.

Furthermore, through unknown means, she had recovered her peak power—

(It's also possible Kamito-kun can't win...)

Currently, it was still possible to return to his side straight away, even if all she could do was help out a little—This temptation surfaced in her thoughts countless times.

However, if she were to turn back now, it would be a betrayal of Kamito's trust.

She understood this principle.

(...Hence, right now, what I am able to do is to open a bloody path for us to escape.)

Supporting herself against a wall, Fianna slowly stood up.

Due to receiving incomplete healing magic, at least the pain could not be felt for the time being.

Dragging one leg, she started moving forward again. At that moment...

She suddenly felt a chill down her spine.

It was a princess maiden's instinct.

She used her good leg to kick the ground hard, jumping forward.

Right behind her, vmmmm—The space at her back distorted with a harsh noise.

A depression appeared on the stone-paved road, caused by an invisible force.

"...!?"

Having escaped death narrowly, Fianna suddenly looked up.

Over there—

"Ah, hahahaha... Found you... Found you..."

With a broken expression, it was the sneering visage of Leschkir Hirschkilt of the Numbers.

"Dame Leschkir!? Wasn't she supposed to have been defeated by Kamito-kun?"

Fallen on the ground, Fianna groaned. She wanted to get up immediately, but—

In the next second, her entire body was weighted down heavily, pinned against the ground.

"...Aguh... Urgh...!"

Fianna felt intense pain throughout her entire body as though all her bones were shattering. Hovering over Leschkir's head was the spherical gravity spirit, producing a strong gravitational field in its surroundings.

"Ahah, ahahahahaha...!"

Looking down at Fianna who was struggling in pain, Leschkir laughed unpleasantly. Despite losing her rational mind, her control over her contracted spirit was not severed.

—Her eyes were murky from the color of hollow darkness.

(That is what's possessing the Elemental Lords...)

The Otherworldly Darkness. Could it be that she had taken it into her body—?

"Die, die, die, diiiiiiie!"

The berserk gravity spirit was crushing the surrounding space, Fianna included.

(...Kamito... -kun...!)

Under the twisted gravity field, she emitted a malformed scream. At that moment—

Suddenly, the gravity field vanished.

(...?)

She looked up. Why had Leschkir's figure disappeared from there—?

"Your Highness, are you alright!?"

"Ellis!?"

Wielding Ray Hawk, Ellis had landed in front of Fianna.

"Thank goodness I found you... What grievous wounds."

Ellis knelt down and picked up Fianna in her arms.

"What about Kamito? Did you come here alone?"

"To enable me to escape, Kamito-kun is fighting currently..."

"I see..."

A pained expression surfaced on Ellis' face. She probably wanted to help Kamito too, but understood that the decision was a correct one. The fact that he had forced Fianna to escape alone implied how difficult an opponent he was facing.

"Your Highness, do you know how to escape from the imperial capital?"

Ellis inquired.

"Yes, at the Michaela temple ahead. There is an escape passage."

"The Michaela temple? That kind of place... Oh well, understood. Let us hurry over."

Ellis nodded, shifted Fianna to a piggyback configuration and chanted wind spirit magic.

She floated up lightly.

To avoid getting discovered by the Imperial Knights, she did not fly too high, but her movement speed would be much faster than running on the ground.

At that moment, the rubble behind them exploded.

Ellis and Fianna suddenly looked back.

"Agaga, gi... Agigigigigi..."

Blown away by Ellis, Leschkir waved her hand in a strange direction while laughing with a voice filled with insanity.

"...Impossible. The Wind Bomb should have been a direct hit."

Immediately after Ellis exclaimed in surprise...

Leschkir Hirschkilt released countless gravity orbs from her hands.

Part 3

Numerous flashes of swords produced a showering of sparks while the sound of blades clashing continued to ring—

A haphazard dance between the crimson demon sword against the Demon Slayer, slicing through the rain.

A beautiful blade dance, like watching princess maidens dancing.

However, this was not a blade dance offered to spirits.

Purely—A battle to the death.

"...Tsk, wake up, Greyworth!"

While blades clashed intensely, Kamito stared into those gray eyes, calling to her desperately.

However, the young maiden did not answer at all. As though suggesting that raising the sword was the same as speaking, she unleashed a sharp slice at him. This astounding pressure of the sword did not match her petite physique.

(...Tsk, and this is only at 30% output—)

Kamito gritted his teeth hard

A bystander might see this as a balanced battle.

However, Kamito knew better. The witch's true level was beyond this.

Was she suppressing her power intentionally, or had she yet to exert full control over this body? If the latter, then maybe he still had hope.

(...Defeat her before she awakens fully!)

But conversely, once the Dusk Witch fully awakened, he would not even have one ten thousandth of a chance of winning.

"Absolute Blade Arts, First Form—Purple Lightning."

Kamito stepped forward, closing in instantly to unleash a deadly move from the Absolute Blade Arts.

With Greyworth as his opponent, holding back would mean getting killed.

However, Greyworth read his full-powered strike.

The flash of godlike speed was dodged by a paper-thin margin—

"Absolute Blade Arts, Alternate Form—Ice Storm Rakshasa!"

As though trying to dig up the stone-paved ground, she swung the demon sword's blade downwards.

Instantly, the ground was covered by vines of ice with countless sharp thorns to pierce Kamito.

This sword technique was unknown to Kamito.

It was impossible for Kamito to inherit the entirety of the Absolute Blade Arts. The Absolute Blade Arts was a set of techniques combining swordsmanship with divine power. Among them included instances of spirit magic that Kamito had not inherited because of his lack of talent in those areas.

Instantly, Kamito stabbed the Demon Slayer's blade into the ground.

(...I'm counting on you, Est, hang in there.)

He poured his entire body's magical power into the sword.

The vines of ice instantly vanished the instant they came into contact with the bright flash released by the Demon Slayer.

Acting on a hunch that he could rely on the power of Est's unparalleled magic resistance to neutralize spirit magic Absolute Blade Arts, Kamito took a gamble.

Once again, Greyworth closed in instantly.

A downward slash from an upper stance, Kamito blocked using a two-handed grip.

So heavy.

Next, Greyworth released the divine power concentrated in her legs in one go the instant she kicked the ground. This was the most basic skill that Kamito had learned during his first time. However, Kamito's use of it was still far inferior in potency compared to the Dusk Witch's continual use of it, supported by her vast reserves of divine power.

A mere step forward.

Yet raised to the realm of divine speed, Purple Lightning was probably impossible to see clearly.

With only a split second remaining, in order to evade this Purple Lightning successfully—

(I can't believe that's really just a greeting...!?)

Without retreating, Kamito counterattacked the incoming sword.

Retreat was absolutely not an option. Without seeing through a thrust of godlike speed, it would be very dangerous if the enemy seized an opening. He had no choice but to engage in melee.

Fortunately, this was also what the other side wanted. Joy surfaced in the girl's eyes

(...Tsk, her sadistic nature hasn't changed at all!)

While Kamito was making a snide mental remark...

He heard a faint explosion from afar.

It was in Fianna's direction.

Although he did not turn his head to look, for an instant, his concentration was broken.

"Don't get distracted during battle—"

The girl before him said coldly. In the next instant—

"Kaha—!"

She kicked him violently in the belly.

Kamito fell on the ground and stopped breathing for an instant.

"Is this all you can do, Demon King—?"

The girl asked coldly.

Her demon sword's blade flashed before his eyes—

(...Tsk, has nothing changed compared to three years ago?)

Just as Kamito prepared himself for death, in that very moment...

A crimson flash flew over.

(What!?)

Greyworth forcefully swung her demon sword horizontally in front of herself, deflecting the flash.

CLAAAAAAAAAAAAANG!

The flash bounced away in another direction, causing a huge explosion when it struck a building.

Debris fell, producing a huge cloud of dirt and dust.

Greyworth jumped away. Crimson flashes of light fell like torrential rain upon her earlier position.

(...Wh... at...?)

Kamito turned his gaze to where the flash of light had originated.

At that moment—

"—Shall I lend a helping hand, Kazehaya Kamito?"

Sternly, a voice as hard as glass resounded in the air.

In the sky of the drizzling imperial capital, a girl dressed in military uniform—

"Leonora?"

Kamito widened his eyes.

Indeed, the one who had rescued Kamito was Leonora Lancaster.

She was the princess knight from the Dragon Duchy of Dracunia whom Kamito had fought in deathmatches at the Blade Dance festival.

"What a disgrace, Kazehaya Kamito. To think that the one who had defeated me would fall so low."

Saying that, Leonora jumped down gallantly from her dragon's back to land by Kamito's side.

"...Leonora, what are you doing here?"

Forgetting the situation, the dumbfounded Kamito asked.

Leonora suddenly smiled mischievously.

"Despite how I may look, I am a princess of the Dragon Duchy of Dracunia, you know? As the Dragon Nation's representative, I am participating in Ordesia's All Nations Conference."

"...I see. Now that you mention it, you are a princess of sorts."

Like not wearing underwear on occasion, his brain had unintentionally forgotten this detail, but—

Indeed, Leonora Lancaster was a princess from the Dragon Duchy of Dracunia.

"Hmm, what do you mean by 'of sorts'? How impudent."

"S-Sorry...! Anyway, thanks a lot, Leonora."

Realizing he had been quite rude just now, Kamito apologized frantically.

"But quite an interesting situation seems to have arisen."

Leonora looked at Millennia who was hovering in the air.

"Cardinal of the Holy Kingdom, what are you plotting in secret? If you are involved in the earlier abortive attempt at assassinating the emperor, then on principle, the Dragon Nation cannot overlook the matter."

Millennia laughed derisively and said:

"Oh my, Miss Dragon, the Holy Kingdom is responding to His Highness Arneus' request to capture the Second Princess, the mastermind of the emperor's attempted assassination. Know that if you were to cause trouble, the Holy Kingdom would naturally regard this as an international conflict between Ordesia and Dracunia."

Leonora smiled fearlessly in response.

"It matters not to me. I have already obtained my own nation's consent."

"...What do you mean by that?"

"The Dragon Nation's delegation will be returning home today with the intention of exercising unilateral intervention in the Theocracy's civil war. There is no reason anymore to join forces with Ordesia which has become the Holy Kingdom's puppet."

"In that case, Dracunia's Dragon King intends to make enemies with a certain person of authority..."

Millennia's violet iris flashed with penetrating light.

"Your side will surely come to regret this choice, Miss Dragon—"

Greyworth readied her demon sword in a stance and started facing off against Kamito and Leonora.

"Allow me to aid you. This isn't an opponent you can defeat singlehandedly, right?"

Saying that, Leonora stood at Kamito's side.

"Leonora... No, that's—"

Kamito shook his head.

Although he was very grateful for her offer, given the opponent, he must not get her involved.

"No, I am doing this willfully. You may not refuse."

Leonora raised her hand and recited a spirit language summoning.

At the same time, the pitch-black magic dragon transformed into a gigantic sword held in Leonora's hand.

Balmung the holy sword of dragonslaying—an elemental waffe concealing astounding destructive power.

"It would be troublesome if you were to die here—"

Swinging the gigantic sword with one hand, she stabbed its blade into the ground.

"..."

Kamito agonized for a moment then immediately replied.

"—Thanks."

One simple word.

Leonora Lancaster—The strongest elementalist of the Knights of the Dragon Emperor.

For Kamito right now, she was the strongest ally.

Supposing Greyworth had yet to enter a fully awakened state—

There was still a chance of winning if the two of them worked together.

"Leonora, go all-out from the start. We'll die unless we decide the match in one go."

"Yes, I already know that this is no ordinary opponent—"

As expected of Greyworth, Kamito could sense her power through his skin even though she had not returned to her normal state.

"—Excellent. I was feeling that a single opponent would be slightly underwhelming."

The Dusk Witch licked her demon sword's blade and said with a smile.

Part 4

"Ahaha, ahahahahahaha!"

Leschkir Hirschkilt's broken laughter sounded across the ground.

Flying randomly, the gravity orbs destroyed the surrounding buildings indiscriminately.

"...Tsk, how unruly...!"

Carrying Fianna on her back, Ellis skillfully controlled the wind enveloped around her legs to evade the gravity orbs.

The shots were very random, which made it difficult to predict their trajectories.

Furthermore, a direct hit from such firepower would not end well.

"Ellis, over there—"

Fianna whispered lightly in Ellis ear.

At the far end of the road, the target temple could be seen.

Compared to Nefescal Palace or the Great Shrine of Areishia, it was a temple small enough to be overlooked. Without any large scale rites and festivities such as the Great Festival of the Spirits held there, it was essentially a neglected location in the imperial capital.

Was there really a royal escape passage in this kind of place?

Suddenly, a gravity orb released by Leschkir struck the bell tower overhead.

Space was twisted and ripped apart. The collapsing rubble fell down all at once—

"This is bad—!"

Ellis went pale. Her own situation aside, while carrying Fianna currently, it would be very hard to evade the rubble completely.

"Incinerate everything, scorching fireball of conflagration—!"

The incoming fireball exploded in the air.

With a deafening roar, the explosion pulverized the massive debris over Ellis, turning it into ash.

"Over here, Ellis!"

"That was a great help, Claire—"

Landing lightly in front of Ellis was Claire with Flametongue in her hand.

Although they had split up in their search, after hearing the explosion sounds on this side, she had hurried over.

"Fianna, are you okay?"

Catching sight of Fianna, Claire breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh my, I am terribly sorry... for making you two worry."

"Don't let it bother you. Before the Second Princess, you are a member of Team Scarlet, first and foremost. Helping you is only natural."

"Hmm, precisely—But we currently do not have the leisure to chat!"

Ellis swung Ray Hawk to bounce away an incoming gravity orb.

"Ah, ahahahaha, don't run awaaaaaaaaaaaaaay."

"Uwah... W-What the heck is that..."

Seeing Leschkir chasing them while laughing madly, Claire's face twitched.

"Leschkir Hirschkilt of the Numbers. Right now, she is insane from the Otherworldly Darkness."

"Otherworldly Darkness? Why is that kind of thing—"

"Save it for later. If we don't escape first..."

"R-Right..."

Claire nodded.

At this rate, the commotion was going to bring the Imperial Knights running to the scene.

"I will stop her here. Ellis, take Fianna and run now—"

"Yes, understood—"

Ellis kicked the ground. The wind concentrated at her feet erupted, accelerating her instantly.

Seeing them off, Claire readied her flaming whip to face off against the pursuing Leschkir.

Despite the state of insanity, the opponent was one of the Numbers, known as the Empire's strongest knights. Her power level vastly outstripped Claire's.

(Nice one, but it's not impossible!)

She skillfully controlled her whip to deflect an incoming gravity orb that was crashing wildly, sending it flying away—

"Huh...?"

—Something strange happened then.

Leschkir's hovering body suddenly fell to the ground.

It looked as though she fell due to her gravity control being interrupted rather than intentionally.

Thus, she suddenly lost consciousness, not moving at all.

"...W-What?"

Claire frowned in surprise.

In the next instant...

The gravity spirit hovering over Leschkir's head began to expand as though it was going to explode.

"...!?"

Part 5

"Let's go!" "Yeah—"

Kamito and Leonora started running at the same time.

In front, Leonora raised Balmung up high and took a leap.

The stone paved ground shattered from the impact.

"Dracunia Style Blade Arts—Drag Slash!"

Pouring in a huge amount of divine power, she brought the massive sword down at once with an overhead chop.

Impossible to block. Even if one stopped the blade, one would still be crushed by the fierce shockwave. Compared to the exquisite finesse of the Absolute Blade Arts, this was a rowdy skill of extreme violence.

—Consequently, normal swordsmanship was unable to handle it.

Greyworth jumped to the side.

Aiming there, Leonora swung the massive sword down with all her strength.

Boom—It was like a cannon's roar. The impact ripped the ground apart, producing a gigantic crater.

Astounding destructive power as always.

However, Greyworth stabbed her demon sword into the ground to brace against the impact. Twisting her petite body, she immediately drew out the sword and instantly launched a thrust with lightning speed at the stationary Leonora.

(...Tsk, I won't let you!.)

Absolute Blade Arts, First Form—Purple Lightning.

Releasing the divine power concentrated at his feet with a kick against the ground, Kamito accelerated instantly.

The Demon Slayer and the crimson demon sword crossed, scattering intense sparks.

"Ohhhhhhhhhh!"

In terms of the strength of the elemental waffe, Est was superior. If he kept pushing down forcefully like this—

—Greyworth's lips parted slightly as though whispering something.

(...Spirit magic!?)

The demon sword, as red as blood, hummed slightly.

Warned by instinct, Kamito instantly pulled back to create distance.

"O greedy and blood-drinking servant—Blood Thorn."

Blood-colored vines flew out of thin air, aiming to pierce the retreating Kamito with sharp thorns.

"Absolute Blade Arts, Third Form—Shadowmoon Waltz!"

Kamito kept slicing all the vines shooting out from thin air nonstop.

Elimination magic was not Greyworth's specialty. It was most likely an attribute of the crimson demon sword spirit.

Without slowing down the pace of her offense, Greyworth attacked again immediately.

So fast. Kamito poured divine power into his sword and transformed Est into the one-handed form of the Demon King's Sword.

"Go forth and pierce, all-annihilating demon lightning of punishment—Vorpal Blast!"

The erupting black lightning shot at Greyworth. However, every strike was dodged by Greyworth using inhuman movements.

However, this was merely a diversion—

From behind, he could sense a massive amount of expanding divine power.

"Let my wrath transform into a roar to pierce the earth—Drag Blast!"

Leonora released spirit magic of extreme proportions, charging while leaving cracks in the ground.

At the same time, Kamito began to sprint too.

(This is the moment to decide the battle—!)

Using the demon sword infused with divine power, Greyworth deflected the massive dragon projectile.

However, the firepower of that magic was of such strength, after all. She lost balance severely.

Kamito charged all at once and swung the Demon King's Sword.

Two strikes, three strikes—He kept launching combo attacks to deprive her of any chance to counterattack.

At that moment, Leonora swung her massive sword. Compared to Kamito who was using attack frequency to overwhelm the enemy, Leonora's strike prioritized a one-hit kill. Confronted with two completely different sword styles, even one such as Greyworth had not choice but to defend to the very end.

"Dracunia Style Blade Arts—Drag Slash!"

Leonora raised her sword high, preparing for a bold move. Naturally, the enemy did not miss this opening. Greyworth immediately went for a counterattack, but that was precisely what Kamito was waiting for.

Kamito had Est go through another Mode Shift—creating twin swords for dual wielding.

Then—

"Absolute Blade Arts, Destructive Form—Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance - Sixteen Consecutive Strikes!"

He unleashed the Absolute Blade Arts' secret move.

Part 6

After reaching the temple's interior, Ellis gently lowered Fianna.

Due to the isolation barrier deployed in their surroundings, no sound could be heard from outside.

At the deepest part of the temple was a small stone tablet used for worshiping spirits.

"Your Highness, then the so-called escape route is—"

"Yes, please wait for a moment—"

Fianna held a small knife in her hand, one used for altar ceremonies—

She used the blade to slice her own thumb.

Drip, the blood flowed onto the stone tablet.

"What on earth is this—"

With puzzlement, Ellis frowned.

After all, the current situation was beyond urgent—

But in the next instant, Ellis widened her eyes.

The script of spirit language carved on the stone tablet suddenly glowed blue.

"This is...!"

"A Gate—one that only royal blood can activate."

Saying that, Fianna started to recite a spirit language incantation.

At that moment—

"...E-Ellis, oh no!"

Claire ran over, panting heavily.

"What happened, Claire? Dame Leschkir—"

Mid-sentence, Ellis fell silent.

Outside the entrance, a gigantic sphere kept growing, expanding nonstop!

"Could it be that the spirit is running out of control, devoured by the Otherworldly Darkness?"

"Leschkir can no longer control that gravity spirit. At this rate, the runaway reaction is going to collapse sooner or later."

"If that thing collapses—"

"Yes, this entire area will be blown away!"

Part 7

The Absolute Blade Arts' secret move, the "Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance" blasted the Dusk Witch—

Greyworth was sent into the air before falling on the ground in a parabolic trajectory.

(...We did... it...?)

Kamito panted while stabbing the Demon Slayer upright into the ground.

He had no more energy left. His entire body's divine power had been poured into the sixteen consecutive strikes just now.

If that still could not defeat the enemy, they would be out of options.

(Please, don't stand up...)

While staring at collapsed Greyworth, Kamito prayed in his heart.

However—

"You really showed me a pretty good move there..."

"......!?"

Holding the demon sword, Greyworth slowly got up.

(That didn't do the job...!)

With a look of despair, Kamito could not help but groan.

The Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance was a sword technique capable of vanquishing an archdemon-class spirit in one go.

He had not held back just now.

Kamito had completely released all the divine power he had been conserving for that moment.

However, among the sixteen strikes he had launched, only two of them could be considered accurate hits—No more than that. The rest were all seen through and dodged.

(—I didn't think that she'd actually be able to dodge the Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance when seeing it for the first time.)

No, more precisely, this did not count as her first time seeing it. Despite losing past memories, her body, deeply familiar with the Absolute Blade Arts, would still retain memories—

(Damn... it...)

Blood flowed down Greyworth's cheek.

She stuck out her tongue and licked the drip of blood.

"Ahh, this—*So this is my blood?*"

"...?"

In that instant...

Kamito felt a surging chill.

Something ominous—

The awakening of something that absolutely must not be allowed to awaken—

That sort of premonition.

(...What the heck?)

Kamito held his breath.

The girl before him suddenly felt like a different person—

—At that moment.

"—No, the time is not yet ripe."

In the air, Millennia Sanctus slowly began to speak.

Contrasting with her calm expression, there was a hint of impatience in her voice.

Then she rapidly recited some kind of foreign language—neither spirit language nor High Ancient—forming a seal with one hand.

In the next instant, darkness suddenly appeared under Greyworth's feet—

Within the blink of an eye, her petite body was devoured.

"Wha...?"

...Kamito watched all this in shock—

Seeing his reaction, Millennia shrugged.

"It seems that it was too soon to allow her to meet you. It almost ruined a plan of great importance..."

"Plan...?"

Millennia smiled faintly then shook her head apologetically.

"This is enough for today. Let us play next time when the chance arises, Onii-chan."

Making the same hand sign as earlier, Millennia was likewise devoured by darkness, disappearing without trace.

Left behind was only the shattered stone-paved ground and marks from the intense battle.

"She fled? ...But it does not fit entirely."

"Yeah."

Kamito nodded in agreement.

Greyworth had been pressuring them the whole time.

Kamito's side had already used up every ace in their hand, yet Greyworth still had power to spare.

Kamito and Leonora would have lost if the fight had continued.

Why did they run away? Completely incomprehensible.

Leonora slowly lowered her sword and said:

"What kind of person is she?"

"..."

After agonizing momentarily about how to answer, Kamito said:

"—My mentor."

A simple and concise answer.

"...Really? No wonder."

Leonora shrugged in apparent acceptance.

"Thank you, Leonora. Looks like I owe you another one..."

Kamito scratched his head and said.

"Well, I would hope to receive a reward accordingly."

Leonora teased in a joking manner.

"Yeah, anything you want, as long as it's in my power."

"Anything I want...?"

After pondering deeply for a while, Leonora blushed.

"Th-Then, when we meet again some day, I will think over it carefully..."

Coughing to clear her throat, she tossed her massive sword into the air.

Leonora's Balmung turned into the pitch-black demon dragon spirit, Nidhogg.

After letting Leonora mount its back, Nidhogg flapped its wings forcefully

At that moment, Kamito suddenly remembered something.

(Come to think of it, I remember Rubia talking about seeking refuge in Dracunia...)

"Oh, Leonora, hold on—"

Just as Kamito was about to call out...

However, the black dragon carrying Leonora was already flapping its wings majestically, flown up into the sky.

"—Looks like I'll be returning this favor unexpectedly soon."

Smiling wryly, Kamito muttered to himself.

"Okay—"

Kamito turned around.

He remembered that Fianna had gone in the direction of the biggest bell tower, but—

"...Say, what is that?"

Seeing the gigantic sphere that was almost about to envelop the entire street, Kamito frowned.

Part 8

"Fianna, is it still not ready!?"

"It is almost about to blow—"

While reciting defensive magic behind Fianna, Claire and Ellis cried out desperately.

The temple's isolation barrier had already been destroyed. The stone tiles near the entrance were curling up one after another.

Devouring surrounding buildings, expanding enough to cover the neighborhood, the gravity spirit looked like it was going to collapse any moment.

However, Fianna was focused on praying in front of the stone tablet.

"Will Kamito make it in time?"

Claire bit her lip and murmured with worry.

It was not like they could leave Kamito behind by himself. But if they continued to wait, they might get caught up in the gravity spirit's collapse and turned into dust together with the entire temple.

—At that moment.

A sword flashed above them and a triangular piece of stone fell from the ceiling.

"...Hwahhh, w-what the heck!?"

Amid the rising dust cloud, the one who descended was—

"Sorry for making you wait...!"

Kamito with the Demon Slayer in hand.

"Kamito!"

"I cannot believe you broke the temple's roof. Karma will catch up to you."

"Sorry, I couldn't go through the entrance... By the way, what's going on there?"

"Leschkir's gravity spirit went out of control—"

The gravity spirit expanded further.

It was almost critical—

"Hurry up, Fianna!"

Seeing that, Claire yelled.

"We shall return, the seal of the ancient covenant, where it was branded—
Successor of royal blood—At this very time and place, open the Gate—"

The Gate, a vortex of light, appeared out of thin air.

"...This is the royal family's escape route?"

"Yes, hurry and enter it!"

While Fianna was shouting, the gravity spirit suddenly contracted rapidly—

"It is going to blow...!"

In the next instant, the gravity sphere exploded.

Chapter 2 - Banquet at Winter Gulf

Part 1

Meanwhile, everyone at the Laurenfrost castle of Winter Gulf was gearing up for a celebration banquet.

Having stayed behind on her own to lead reconstruction efforts in Laurenfrost territory after the devastation brought by Zirnitra, it was only natural that Rinslet did not know about Kamito's group getting arrested upon their return to the Academy or the attempted assassination of the emperor at the imperial capital. After all, the mountain path through the Kyria Mountain Range, serving as the link between Laurenfrost and the imperial capital, had been damaged by Zirnitra's earlier rampage and had yet to be restored to a state suitable for passage.

While the castle was bustling in preparation for the celebrations, Rinslet was in a certain room, changing into the Academy uniform.

"...Sigh, I would really like to see Kamito-san sooner."

Just as she was sighing to herself...

"Lady Rinslet, Mireille-sama has finished her preparations."

From outside the door came the voice of Natalia, head maid and captain of the Wolf Ritters.

"I-I shall be there presently!"

Rinslet hastily finished changing and exited to the corridor.

Ahead in the corridor, Natalia's upright standing figure could be seen.

"Natalia, uh, I was talking to myself just now..."

"No, I did not hear any sound."

"I-Is that so...?"

Rinslet breathed a sigh of relief for now.

"However, I am sympathetic to your feelings of wanting to see your beloved as soon as possible."

"Natalia~!"

Thump thump thump.

Gone bright red in the face, Rinslet kept hammering her fists on the head maid's back. At that moment—

"Wait, Onee-sama, why are you playing around over here? Today is my important day, you know?"

Dressed in the Divine Ritual Institute's princess maiden attire, the third daughter, Mireille, walked towards them along the corridor from up ahead. Following her like a shadow was her personal maid, Milla Bassett. In the back was even the second daughter, Judia, sitting in a wheelchair.

Rinslet stopped hammering the head maid and coughed lightly.

"Mireille, it looks great on you."

Hearing Rinslet's comment, Milla nodded silently.

"Really? But it's harder to move around in these clothes compared to the castle's formal dress..."

Mireille frowned, lifted the hem of her ritual attire and spun around on the spot.

"Stop it. Unseemly behavior will incur the displeasure of spirits."

Seeing Mireille spinning, Rinslet pushed down on her head and stopped her.

"...Th-That would be a problem."

Mireille hastily settled down.

Indeed, Mireille was about to head out to a shrine to conduct a spirit contract ceremony.

Earlier, the border province of Laurenfrost had achieved reconciliation with the reclusive Forest Dwellers who lived in the forest all year round, thus reaching an agreement to rebuild the forest that had been destroyed by Zirnitra. As a return gift, the Forest Dwellers decided to present Mireille with one of their enshrined spirits.

The shrine for the spirit contract ceremony was to be the cave where the second Laurenfrost daughter, Judia, had been imprisoned under *cursed ice*. Due to this complicated past, someone had suggested changing to a different venue. But now that it was known that the location was no longer dangerous, plus the fact that it was the most sacred shrine in the Laurenfrost region no matter what, hence in the end, preparations were still made to carry out the ritual there.

"I really wish Kamito-oniisama could see me in my formal attire."

Mireille murmured wistfully.

"In that case, how about inviting him to the next Winter Solstice Festival?"

Eyes closed, Judia spoke up. After being freed from the cursed ice, although her health was gradually recovering, her vision was still lost.

"Ah, that's true too. If that's the case, Onee-sama can show off her formal attire to Kamito-oniisama too."

"M-Mireille, please do not make fun of your elder sister!"

Blushing to her ears, Rinslet became flustered.

The Laurenfrost's Winter Solstice Festival's was a festival whose fame spread not only within the Empire's borders but also reached all the other nations. During the festival, snow sculptures of all kinds of spirits would be found all over the city, drawing in large numbers of sightseeing tourists... As a side note, in recent years, snow sculptures of Ren Ashbell were the most dominant in terms of numbers.

As dictated by tradition, the Winter Solstice Festival was presided by princess maidens from the Laurenfrost family. Hence, if Kamito were to

be invited here, he would naturally see the Laurenfrost sisters in their formal attire.

"Mireille-sama, the time—"

At that moment, Milla the maid reminded.

"Then let's go—"

Leaving behind the wheelchair-bound Judia and head maid Natalia, Mireille and company set off for the shrine.

Part 2

"...Ugh... Owww..."

The next instant after Claire and her party jumped into the vortex of light while huddled together—

Kamito fell down amidst total darkness.

(This place is...?)

—Just as he was about to make his body upright, he suddenly noticed something important.

(...I-I can't breathe!?)

Kamito's nose was under the weight of something elastic, preventing him from breathing. *Don't tell me I got buried under a mountain of rubble because of that gigantic gravity sphere—*

(...It's no joke if I really got buried alive!)

Kamito tried every way to get himself out and grabbed the object pressing against his nose.

Boing.

He felt a soft and supple texture. His fingers sensed a bit of warmth.

(...W-What is this?)

Confronted with this incredible tactile feeling, Kamito tilted his head in puzzlement.

Boing. Boing boing.

"Hyah!"

"...!?"

Suddenly, Kamito heard a scream overhead.

"O-O, O-O fire, bring forth light!"

In the next instant, a small fireball appeared in the darkness with a pop.

What entered his view was—

(...C-Claire!?)

Kamito cried out in his heart.

With a fireball in her hand, Claire looked down at Kamito with a shocked expression.

(...In other words, what blocked my face just now, don't tell me it was...)

Indeed... That soft and elastic object was Claire's bottom.

"Y-You, y-you, w-what, w-what are you doing~...!?"

Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble...!

Claire's face went bright red while her crimson hair rose up like a cat.

"W-Wait, I was just trying to figure out my surroundings..."

Kamito instantly panicked and explained frantically.

"Because it felt nice, so I couldn't help... Ah—"

"...~Tsk, y-you, y-you pervert and beast of lust~!"

Tearfully, Claire lost her temper and summoned Flametongue in her hand.

"I-I haven't even had a b-bath yet... You jerk!"

"B-By the time I came to my senses, you were already on top of me, honest...!"

Confronted with Claire who was angry for a strange reason, Kamito frantically shook his head.

"...S-Say, where is this place?"

Kamito stood up and looked around.

"T-Trying to change the subject huh..."

Despite her displeasure, Claire still used the fireball lit on her palm to illuminate the surroundings.

Numerous ice stalactites were growing from the ceiling while hard ice covered the floor... At the very least, this was not the same temple as where Kamito and company were at earlier.

(...By the way, this place looks a bit familiar.)

Where had he seen it? It should have been recent...

"I've been here before... I think."

"What is going on?"

Frowning, Claire increased the fireball's brightness.

—Next, they found Ellis and Fianna collapsed nearby.

"Are they okay?"

Kamito knelt down and gently rocked them by the shoulder.

"...Ooh, mmm... Kamito?"

"...Kamito-kun?"

Ellis and Fianna opened their eyes.

"Fianna, what happened? What on earth was that vortex of light earlier—"

Claire's question went straight to the point.

"...Looks like the *teleportation* was a success."

Fianna pressed on her temples while she replied softly.

"Teleportation?"

"Yes, that temple was a *teleportation device* provided to royals to use for escaping the imperial capital."

"...I see now. Oh, so that's what you meant by it being not available for Arneus."

A person without an elementalist's power would not be able to activate the magic device either, despite being part of the royal bloodline. Even

if Arneus knew of the location's existence, he would still be unable to send pursuers.

"So, where did we teleport to?"

"Hmm, supposing there was no mistake in setting the coordinates, it is probably..."

At that moment, a human presence approached on the other side of the darkness.

"...!"

The four of them instantly raised their guard.

Apart from Kamito and company, did someone else pass through the vortex of light in pursuit...?

With nervous expressions, the group stared intently into the depths of the dark.

Only to see appearing from there—

"...Who goes there!?"

"Rinslet!?"

It turned out to be Rinslet, holding an ice arrow in her hand, accompanied by the wide-eyed Mireille.

Part 3

"My, truly what a surprise..."

Within Margrave Laurenfrost's territory, at Winter Gulf Castle...

Taken to a great hall in the castle, Kamito and company sat down at a table, drinking black tea specially brewed by Milla Bassett with honey added to warm themselves up from the cold.

"No wonder I found it familiar..."

Setting his teacup down on the table, Kamito muttered quietly.

Indeed, the cave covered with cold ice was precisely where Rinslet's sister Judia had been imprisoned in *cursed ice* by the Water Elemental Lord.

Rinslet had apparently shown up there with Mireille to carry out a spirit contract ceremony.

The ceremony was held successfully after Kamito and company left the cave. Currently, Mireille's new contracted spirit was sitting on her shoulder, a small *snow weasel*. Although lacking Fenrir's intimidating appearance, it looked like a very smart and wise spirit, quite similar to Mireille in that regard. The spirit had already gotten very close to Mireille and was affectionately rubbing its warm fur against her cheek.

"Miss Mireille, uh, may I touch its tail?"

Ellis, who loved cute animals, asked somewhat excitedly.

"Sure, go ahead."

Mireille held onto Ellis' shoulder and immediately, the snow weasel spirit skipped across to Ellis' shoulder and wrapped itself around her neck like a scarf.

"Wow... I-It is quite adorable."

Relaxing her normally serious expression, Ellis beamed nonstop.

(...No, Ellis, you're the one who's adorable.)

—Thinking that such a comment would most likely upset her, Kamito kept his thoughts to himself.

"But thank goodness that the teleportation completed successfully without incident. It would be problematic had we gone to Kelzanos or Fahrengart instead of Laurenfrost."

Fianna whispered quietly.

The temple's teleportation device with Gates connected to the territories of the Four Great Houses—Elstein, Fahrengart, Laurenfrost and Kelzanos.

Among them, the Gate leading to the confiscated Elstein territory no longer existed while the House of Kelzanos was the leader of the pro-Arneus faction of nobles. Although the House of Fahrengart maintained neutrality, if Arneus were to become the official designated successor, they probably would not proactively protect Fianna either. Even having Ellis with them would not help. Given the current situation, the only place within the Ordesia Empire for them to seek asylum was Rinslet's location, Margrave Laurenfrost's territory.

"...In any case, it is wonderful that you are safe and sound, Your Highness."

After Rinslet said that—

Fianna bit her lip hard and looked at Kamito and the others in sequence.

"...Yes, truly, I am... extremely grateful. If you had not come, I would have..."

She spoke in a trembling voice.

Although she had maintained her mental fortitude the whole time, Fianna's tensed mind probably relaxed after coming to a safe place at last. There was sobbing in her voice.

"That goes without saying. You're a member of Team Scarlet."

Hearing Claire's remark that sounded like she was hiding embarrassment, Kamito nodded in agreement.

After wiping her tears away with her fingers, Fianna restored her expression of fortitude and said:

"However, Kamito-kun, how did all of you infiltrate the imperial capital? Especially the nobles district, for which it is probably impossible to enter through ordinary methods."

"Oh, that's a long story..."

Kamito paused for a moment then continued.

"Actually, Rubia's the one who planned out the operation to rescue you, Fianna."

"Rubia-sama?"

Fianna widened her dusk-colored eyes.

Kamito told her everything about the discussion with Rubia on the flying ship.

The Holy Kingdom's conspiracy to undermine the Ordesia Empire. The Fire Elemental Lord who had been reborn somewhere in the human realm. Also, there was Rubia's intention to issue a declaration as Legitimate Ordesia in opposition to the current Ordesia imperial family—

"Legitimate Ordesia?"

"Yes, Nee-sama plans to raise a banner in your name to oppose the Empire that has turned into the Holy Kingdom's puppet state."

"If the declaration of Legitimate Ordesia is issued, Your Highness, it would be tantamount to overt rebellion against the Ordesia imperial family."

"Is that so...? Indeed you are right."

Fianna lowered her head and entered deep thought with a solemn expression.

"I think there's no need for you to give an immediate answer."

Kamito commented. The choice meant betraying the home country that had nurtured her and even her own family, to make enemies of them.

This answer would not be easy to decide. Even if Fianna decided to reject Rubia's plan, Kamito would still respect her wish. Claire, Ellis and Rinslet presumably felt the same.

However, Fianna soon raised her head and looked at Kamito and the others in turn—

"No. I shall become the empress of Legitimate Ordesia."

She declared decisively.

"Fianna, are you sure?"

"Yes, I shall become the empress, to fight the Holy Kingdom—"

Confronted with Kamito's question, Fianna nodded resolutely.

Witnessing Fianna's facial expression of resolve, Kamito and the others looked at one another.

Next—

The first to extend her hand was Claire.

"...Great. I will support your resolve, Fianna."

"Yes, for the sake of my homeland, I am willing to fight on your side, Your Higheness."

Ellis stacked her hand on top of Claire's. Kamito silently placed his hand on top next.

"...Understood. I too shall join you."

Finally, Rinslet also showed an expression of resolve and stacked her hand on top.

"Rinslet, don't you need to govern Laurenfrost?"

"This castle will be governed by Mireille for the time being."

Faced with the frowning Claire, Rinslet asserted with confidence.

"Letting Mireille handle it... Will it really be okay?"

"She has already reached an age capable of employing a contracted spirit. Furthermore, the Wolf Ritters are at Winter Gulf Castle."

"Yes, it'll be okay. While Onee-sama is away, I will complete the job of administration splendidly. Besides, I still have Milla too."

After Mireille nodded, Milla Bassett, who was on standby in the back, nodded as well.

"Indeed, Arneus would not want to make enemies of the Laurenfrost Wolf Ritters until he has all the nobles in the nation under his control..."

Claire analyzed calmly. As long as they obeyed the Empire on the surface, he probably would not recklessly make a move on a border province that was tasked with the the core of the Empire's national defense.

With hands stacked, the four of them focused their gaze on Fianna.

In response, Fianna—

"...Thank you, everyone."

With tears appearing in the corners of her eyes again, she nodded and placed her hand on top at last.

"Then how do we proceed?"

Rinslet asked.

"First, we need to meet up with Rubia's flying ship... Velsaria and the others are supposed to have acted as a diversion for the imperial capital's forces."

"Use my Simorgh. It will be the fastest and most reliable means of communications."

Ellis chanted words of summoning and the demon wind spirit immediately appeared out of thin air with wings spread. After, Ellis spoke a few words of instructions into his ear, Simorgh flapped his wings forcefully and flew away into the sky—

"Before the Captain's bird returns, you should all take a rest at Winter Gulf Castle. As it so happens, Mireille's banquet is about to start."

"Sorry, Rinslet, for making so much trouble for you."

"No need to be formal. Kamito-san, you are the benefactor who had saved Laurenfrost. We are heavily indebted to you."

"A banquet would be nice, but I'd like to take a bath and cleanse myself first."

Claire looked down at her uniform and said.

"Yes... I have not gone through purification for at least three days."

After glancing at Kamito, Fianna blushed shyly.

She had been imprisoned ever since the day of the abortive attempted assassination on the emperor. Although the princess maidens tasked with keeping watch would regularly wipe her body, her holiness still decreased substantially. The reason why she had still been able to summon Georgios while in that state was probably thanks to her unusually strong bond with her contracted spirit.

"Prepare a bath immediately."

Rinslet nodded and swiftly issued orders to the maids in the castle.

Part 4

Fianna's physical condition had weakened due to her imprisonment. After being treated by the castle's healers, she was taken to an open-air bath outside the castle.

Claire and Ellis, who did not need healing, had already finished taking their baths and gone to join Rinslet to help out in the courtyard preparations for the celebration banquet.

The outdoor changing area felt so cold that it was like freezing.

Shivering while removing her tattered dress and taking off her underwear, Fianna pinched the flesh on her arm while naked and sighed slightly.

"...I've lost quite a bit of weight and my skin has worsened too."

During the several day long prison life, not only was she deprived of bathing but she also did not receive enough sustenance apart from water. At the same time, while isolated from information of the external world, her body and mind were tormented by the fear of the upcoming execution whose exact date and time was unknown.

Fianna slowly sat down on a wet rock.

Dipping her feet into the open-air bath's hot water, she instantly felt comfortable stimulation on her skin.

"Sigh..."

Slowly, lowering herself into the water up to her shoulders, she exhaled.

Although it was not a natural hot spring, the water was very warm after being heated by a fire spirit crystal, thus soothing her weakened body. She could feel the received divine power circulating within herself while the lost holiness gradually recovered.

Fianna closed her eyes and breathed deeply and slowly.

With this, she could truly feel at peace at last.

(This place is no longer that prison...)

Staring at the gray cold sky, she murmured to herself mentally.

However, this was surely the only moment that she could relax like this...

Legitimate Ordesia as planned by Rubia—If Fianna were to become its monarch, it meant raising the banner of rebellion against the powerful Ordesia Empire.

That could possibly develop into a large-scale civil war, tearing the Empire into two.

(I cannot allow Ordesia to become the Holy Kingdom's puppet state... But—)

She still worried. Even though she had mustered her resolve at one point, her heart was still slightly wavering after all.

(Don't worry, I am no longer the Lost Queen from that time...)

Fianna wrapped her arms tightly around her wet body. Then recalling the sensations of Kamito's embrace, her lips moved apart involuntarily.

(Back then, although Kamito-kun was behaving a bit strangely...)

Arriving on the scene before Fianna's eyes and defeating Leschkir Hirschkilt at the time, Kamito was different from his usual self. He had given off a slightly scary impression.

(Still, having Kamito-kun acting that way once in a while was not bad either...)

Recalling memories from that time, that powerful embrace, the taking of her lips, she instantly felt her cheeks heat up.

Back then, a certain violent power had rampaged inside Fianna's body, allowing her to deploy her elemental waffe even when her divine power had been almost completely depleted. That power, like a howling storm, was still lingering inside her, smoking nonstop like a wood fire.

"Haaa... Mm..."

Feeling the inside of her body gradually heating up, Fianna moaned slightly.

(...Tsk, no good, I must calm down...)

Fianna's fingertips naturally reached for the tips of her breasts.

"...Ah, mmm...!"

Sweet numbing pain was an unknown feeling she had never experienced before.

Fianna forcefully dug her fingernails into her skin in an attempt to cover up her body's elevated temperature using pain, but it seemed more like adding dry firewood to a smoking flame.

"...Mm, ah... Hoo... Ah, ummmmmm...!"

Sweet sounds leaked out from her gorgeous cherry lips.

"...N-No good... Why, is... this...?"

...No, she was actually well aware of the reason. It must be because she was thinking about Kamito.

Her consciousness gradually grew hazy.

(A-At this rate, I am going to act weird...)

Fianna drove out the thoughts of Kamito from her mind for now, closed her eyes and regulated her breathing.

She was supposed to have fully mastered the method of maintaining a calm mind regardless of the situation, back during her training at the Divine Ritual Institute. The harsh training included spending a number of days while soaking her body underwater. However, no matter what method she tried, her body did not cool down at all. Instead, the more she tried not to think of Kamito, the more easily his face would surface in her mind...

(...Ooh~, s-such shameless ideas when clearly even thinking such thoughts should be forbidden...!)

As a pure princess maiden, Fianna's entire mind was about to be washed out by a flood of terrifying lustful delusions that she had never imagined before...

Inside these thoughts were delusions including things that Kamito would absolutely not do in reality. Noticing a desire within herself to be treated violently like a plaything, to be violated beyond recognition... Fianna instantly felt ashamed of these hidden desires.

(H-How a-awful of me. I can't believe I'm wishing for Kamito-kun to do such things...)

He would surely despite her if he found out what she had been thinking...

As though punishing herself, Fianna dug her fingernails into her skin.

Red marks appeared on her pale skin but in spite of that, her body's aching did not subside.

"...Ah, mm, yah...!"

Amid her hazy consciousness, Fianna's fingers gradually slid down from her chest to her lower abdomen...

Part 5

"...Hmm?"

Sitting on a rock, Kamito suddenly looked up.

He was secretly acting as Fianna's bodyguard some distance away from the bath.

Although this place was under the jurisdiction of Winter Gulf Castle, which was safe, with a celebration banquet about to start, the nearby residents would be coming to the castle. It was a real possibility that spies from the Holy Kingdom or the pro-Arneus faction might be mixed among them.

He prepared himself to take instant action if anyone suspicious approached the vicinity.

(...Just now, I think I heard Fianna's voice.)

If Fianna screamed, he could instantly rush over from this instant. However, her voice just now was far too quiet to be considered a scream. The sound would have been impossible to hear had Kamito's hearing not been trained at the Instructional School.

Picking up the Demon Slayer by the hilt, he quietly stood up.

Next, he made his way to the rocky area where Fianna was bathing and listened carefully.

...Ah, mmmm... Kami... to-kun, help... me...

"...!"

Instantly, Kamito ran over on reflex.

Kicking against a rock, he instantly jumped up and used divine power to enhance his leg strength to clear the wall of rock.

"Fianna, are you okay!?"

Landing on a rock in the bath, he swung his sword to create wind for sweeping steam away.

—He saw Fianna's figure, curled up in the hot water.

"—Ah, mm, huff, huff, huff..."

"Fianna!"

Kamito hastily rushed over, picked up Fianna in his arms and placed her outside the hot water bath.

Although it was his first time to witness her naked body and he could not help but blush, now was not the time to be concerned about such things—

"Huff, huff... Kamito... -kun...?"

Fianna blinked, her mind in a daze.

"What's wrong? Did you get dizzy from soaking for too long?"

Kamito took off his jacket and covered up her body.

Fianna slowly reached out and held Kamito's arm.

Her seductive dusk-colored eyes stared at Kamito intently...

"Sor, ry... Suddenly, my body heated up... Ah, mm...♪ "

Instantly, her body shook violently as though having a convulsion.

Just then, Kamito saw it.

On Fianna's neck, a birthmark resembling a seal was appearing—

(...This is!?)

It was a pattern sharing some similarity with Restia's *spirit seal*. However, this one was far more complicated and ominous—

"Could it be the seal of Ren Ashdoll, the Darkness Elemental Lord...!?"

Kamito gasped forcefully. He recalled the conversation he had had with Rubia on the flying ship's deck prior to sneaking into the imperial capital.

—The Demon King's princess maidens. Reportedly a thousand years ago, Demon King Solomon had taken princess maidens from conquered

nations and made them his concubines, sharing the Darkness Elemental Lord's power with them. The power that Kamito had given Fianna through a kiss was probably eating away at Fianna's body, tormenting her right now...

"...Mm, ah, ooh... Huff, huff..."

Held in Kamito's arms, Fianna panted painfully.

Ellis and Rinslet probably had not experienced such a strong reaction in their instances... But after all, back when he kissed Fianna, Kamito was almost about to be devoured by the power of darkness within him. Most likely, that was what caused more direct effects on her.

(...Hmm, what should I do?)

Kamito bit his lip. Taking her back to the castle's healers would probably not help. Was sitting here, waiting for the power of darkness to subside on its own the only option...?

Fianna gripped Kamito's arm tightly, opened her mouth and bit him. With that, her irregular breathing seemed to calm down slightly.

"...Mm, Kamito-kun, sorry... This... Ahhh!"

"...It's okay. Until you settle down, carry on like this."

With his jacket between them, Kamito hugged Fianna.

After keeping this up for some time... Fianna's breathing gradually turned steady.

A couple of red bite marks had been added Kamito's shoulder and arm.

"Has it calmed down?"

"Y-Yes..."

Held in Kamito's arms, Fianna lowered her head shyly.

"...Sorry, it's my fault."

"...Huh?"

"Uh, I kissed you once in the imperial capital, right? Back then, I think part of the Darkness Elemental Lord's inside me transferred to you, Fianna."

"So... that power is the Darkness Elemental Lord's..."

Fianna looked like she had guessed this to some extent too. She nodded gently.

"B-Back, I think I lost my mind a bit... Uh, sorry."

"I understand, Kamito-kun. You were clearly behaving oddly at the time."

Confronted with Kamito bowing his head in apology, Fianna smiled with a chuckle.

Then she blushed to her ears.

"Uh... Keep what happened a secret, okay?"

"Y-Yeah, of course..."

After hearing Fianna's quiet whisper, Kamito nodded repeatedly.

—At that moment, Kamito suddenly recalled a certain matter.

"Speaking of secrets, about Greyworth—"

"...Yes."

"I think it'd be best not to tell Claire and the others for now. From their perspective, the Dusk Witch is someone they idolize. Telling them right now would be a big shock."

"I agree that this would be more appropriate. After all, this is a rare day of celebration."

"Yeah, let's wait until after we meet up with Rubia before deciding the timing to let them know."

Part 6

It was evening.

The celebration banquet to commemorate Mireille's spirit contract officially commenced in the castle's spacious courtyard.

Bonfires were lit all over the courtyard while the tables were laden with abundant delicacies.

There was honey-roasted pigeon, turnip and lentil soup, and local river fish, a Laurenfrost specialty, steamed while wrapped in spices. Also, grilled deer steak, smoked quail eggs, barley bread fresh out of the oven and topped with cheese... At the time same, the wine cellar was opened up to distribute quality wine to the local residents who had gathered here. As for children and people who could not drink, soda and fruit juice was prepared for them.

"Looks very luxurious."

Sitting at a table in a corner of the courtyard, Kamito remarked while eating bread.

This was bread that had been deep-fried with a thick coating after being stuffed with a filling of meat and stewed vegetables. As a famous Laurenfrost specialty, it was so popular that it was rapidly all taken as soon as it was served.

"Yes, I believe that by doing this, we can raise morale in the reconstruction efforts to some extent."

While savoring hot wine, Rinslet replied. As a side note, the one directing the cooking in the kitchen was Rinslet herself. Although she could not personally cook due to the great quantities required, every dish without exception was an exquisite masterpiece in flavor under her direction.

On the altar set up in the middle of the courtyard, dressed in a ritual attire, Mireille was performing a dance together with her contracted spirit, the snow weasel.

Despite being only nine years old, her dance performance was quite spectacular.

"Rinslet-sama, the Lord of Ornore would like to greet you."

"Understood, I shall be there presently."

Called by head maid Natalia, Rinslet stood up. Starting from a while ago, she had been busy nonstop, rushing about to greet lords from various territories.

Claire, Ellis and Fianna were lining up respectively at the long lines for various popular dishes.

At that moment, Kamito felt someone grab his sleeve and tug slowly.

He looked back to see that Est had turned back into human form at some point. She was staring at him intently.

"Est, is there anything you like? I'll go get them for you."

"Yes, I am hungry."

Est nodded.

"You worked really hard too, Est—"

After all, she had clashed with Greyworth's sword many times. An ordinary spirit probably would have shattered in the initial impact.

Holding a plate to carry the food, Kamito was just about to get up when—

"Could this little miss be a spirit?"

A local old lady inquired.

"Yeah, that's right..."

"Wow, just as I thought huh? This is my first time to see a humanoid spirit in my entire life... Thank you, thank you..."

The old lady brought her palms together and started to pay respects to Est. Seeing that, the surrounding locals also gathered around to worship Est. Although it was widely known that the highest ranking spirits could take human form, chances for meeting humanoid spirits were extremely rare, even for the students enrolled at Areishia Spirit Academy.

The residents brought plates piled with food to Est one after another.

"Being worshiped by humans seems like a very distant memory... Ahm, ahm..."

Served with enthusiastic hospitality, Est kept eating nonstop.

...Somehow, watching this scene felt very soothing for one's soul.

"Kamito, feed me too."

"Yup, I got it."

Kamito picked up a fresh hot donut and brought it to Est's mouth.

"Ahm... Very tasty, Kamito."

"Ouch... Est, don't eat me along with it..."

Seeing Est trying to eat his fingers too, Kamito smiled wryly.

"Meow meow!"

This time, it was the hellcat's turn to call out at Kamito's feet.

"Oh, Scarlet, you want some too?"

"Meow..."

Kamito picked up venison wrapped in vegetables and fed it to Scarlet.

"Hold on, don't start feeding Scarlet without permission."

At that moment, Claire and the girls returned with plates filled with food.

"Oh, umm... I've brought you share too, Kamito-kun."

"O-Okay..."

After making eye contact, Kamito and Fianna blushed mildly as though recalling what had happened earlier, looking away in embarrassment.

"So you brought your uniform."

"Yes, I keep my clothes inside Georgios."

After Fianna took her seat at the table, Kamito asked quietly:

"Uh... Are you okay now?"

"Y-Yes... Thanks to you, Kamito-kun, it has calmed down."

Fianna nodded.

"...What are they talking about?"

Watching the two of them, Claire frowned in puzzlement.

Part 7

The banquet lasted until late night. The local population greatly enjoyed being treated to the celebration. However, since the star of the event, Mireille, was still a child, she had apparently gone to bed early.

While listening to the orchestra's music, Kamito also returned to the bedroom assigned to him.

Although he inexplicably found Milla the maid present in his room, rolling about in his bed, she immediately smoothed out the sheets as soon as she noticed Kamito.

"Well then, Kamito-sama, good night."

After bowing her head respectfully, she took her leave.

"...What was that about?"

Puzzled, Kamito changed into pajamas and lay on the bed.

The bed was very soft and comfortable.

With his arms spread out, Kamito stared at the ceiling.

The wound on his flank, supposed to be closed up, was hurting with a dull pain.

(...Greyworth, I never expected you to become our enemy.)

There was a palpable feeling of numbness still lingering on his two hands which he had used to engage the Witch in battle. This familiar sensation was one that he had experienced more than enough times three years ago.

It had been so long since he last faced such fierce resistance. Besides, the number of elementalists capable of matching Kamito blow for blow were few to begin with, countable on one hand.

His opponent at the Blade Dance final match three years ago, Luminaris the Paladin, Rubia Elstein with holy maiden powers, Lurie Lizaldia of the

Numbers, Shao Fu of the Four Gods representing the Quina Empire, and Leonora the dragon knight of Dracunia...

(...Speaking of Leonora, she helped me out again.)

Back then, Leonora had no reason to assist Kamito in battle.

The same went for the Blade Dance too. After challenging Kamito to a match and meeting defeat, she upheld her promise to go help Ellis and Rinslet.

As fellow elementalists, she was truly a good opponent worthy of respect.

In Rubia's plan, the declaration of Legitimate Ordesia required seeking asylum from the Dragon Duchy of Dracunia. He was most likely going to meet Leonora there again—

Immersed in his thoughts, with eyes closed, Kamito soon fell asleep.

Part 8

—Kamito, listen to me, Kamito, where are you...?

Inside endless darkness that stretched without boundary... *Her* voice came.

(Restia... Is that you?)

Guided by the voice, Kamito felt his way around the darkness to advance...

In the center of the lurking darkness, he saw a concentration of greater darkness standing there.

It was the darkness spirit girl, sitting crouched there with her beautiful jet-black wings closed.

(Restia, I am here!)

Towards her figure, Kamito desperately reached out—

"...!"

Kamito woke to a start.

(...A dream huh?)

Wiping sweat from his brow, he slowly sat up.

The sky outside was still dark, so it looked like dawn had not come yet. Normally, he would be woken up by either Scarlet or the presence of Est in his bed. Very rarely would he open his eyes at such an hour.

(...It's been so long since I last had a dream of Restia.)

During the three years of wandering in search of Restia, there was almost never a night when he did not dream of her. Among them included both beautiful dreams from childhood and severe nightmares.

But only in recent times did having such dreams become less and less frequent—

"...!?"

Suddenly, a mild pain passed through his left hand. Kamito could not help but look at the back of his hand, but Restia's disappeared spirit seal had not returned.

This was an occasional illusion. Perhaps fighting Greyworth might have stirred up his past memories with Restia—Reaching this conclusion, Kamito got out of bed.

He somehow felt like he was no longer in the mood for sleep.

After putting on a leather glove over his left hand, he exited the room.

He had abandoned the glove after losing the spirit seal, but after Restia returned with her memories lost, he had started wearing it agian.

Kamito went through the corridor to reach the a balcony in the castle.

The moon was still bright. Looking down at the courtyard below, he could see the place littered with wine bottles and drunken soldiers and locals.

After leaning on the railing and enjoying the night breeze for a while—

"Kamito, what are you doing...?"

Suddenly, he heard a voice.

He looked back to see Claire arrive in her pajamas.

"What's up, Claire?"

"Hmm... I couldn't sleep for some reason."

"I see..."

Claire came up to Kamito and leaned her head against him.

"Claire, are you... drunk?"

"Yes, a little... I might have drank too much."

Her cheeks were a few shades redder. Usually a bit childish, Claire's appearance instantly looked gorgeous with her twintails untied and a

tipsy expression. However, letting such comments loose would probably bring forth the flaming whip, so Kamito kept quiet.

Claire looked out at the starry sky that was even more expansive than the Forest of Ice Blossoms and said:

"Things have gotten huge in many ways."

"Yeah, you're right."

Kamito nodded.

"...It feels like I've experienced many things since meeting you."

"Me too."

Back when he first arrived at the Academy, Kamito's mind was completely occupied with finding Restia.

But now, they were about to be swept into a war to decide the world's fate—

"Back then, I was trying desperately to meet my sister. I did many reckless things, a-and caused lots of trouble for you too."

"Well... After all, I almost got burned to charcoal as soon as we met."

"Th-That was your fault for seeing me naked, Kamito... A-And you even said something about having no interest in a child's naked body, didn't you!?"

"...Now that you mention it, I think you're right."

Thinking back, he had apparently said something quite awful at the time...

"I-It was my first time to be seen naked by a boy, it was such a shock..."

"It was my bad there... Sorry."

Kamito apologized honestly.

"But even though the way we met was so terrible—"

Claire paused then continued.

"Kamito, I think it was truly wonderful that I met you."

Claire lowered her head. Under the night's darkness, it was hard to see her expression clearly. The reason why she could voice her true feelings honestly was because she was drunk, right?

"Me too. I'm deeply grateful for the coincidence that allowed me to meet you in the Spirit Forest back then."

Saying that, Kamito patted Claire on the head.

—Yes, it was *coincidence*. It was only out of coincidence that Kamito, the Demon King's reincarnation, had rescued Claire and even contracted with Est.

It was absolutely not destiny decided by someone—

That coincidence was far more precious than so-called destiny. That was what Kamito thought.

"Kamito..."

Claire looked up and stared at Kamito.

Then taking a deep breath as though committing some kind of resolve—

"Uh, umm, Kamito... I-I..."

—Just at that moment.

Suddenly, Kamito noticed something glowing in the night sky.

"That's...?"

The light source was approaching Winter Gulf Castle.

It was a military ship's searchlight.

"Could it be the Imperial Knights?"

"No, that's... Nee-sama's military ship!"

At the same time as Claire's exclamation—

The outline of the military ship, the Revenant, appeared from the other side of the Kyria Mountain Range.

Chapter 3 - The Distance between Sisters

Part 1

Dawn—

Under the rising sun's rays, the modified military ship, the Revenant, landed in the Forest of Ice Blossoms near Winter Gulf Castle.

The ship's armor was flaking off severely with signs of damage all over.

It must have had an intense battle against Ordesia's Aerial Combat Knights in the imperial capital's outskirts.

Kamito and his team hastily got prepared and met up in front of the flying ship.

"Natalia, I am leaving the rest to you."

"Affirmative, we of the Wolf Ritters will do everything we can to protect Mireille-sama."

The captain of the knights, Natalia, saluted with a straight posture. Behind her, everyone also saluted at the same time. Not just the Wolf Ritters but all the soldiers in the castle had come to see them off. This showed how much Rinslet was loved by the people of the castle.

"Mireille, you have to listen to Natalia and Milla properly."

"Don't worry, Onee-sama. Until you return, I will definitely complete Laurenfrost's restoration."

Mireille nodded in an exaggerated manner.

"Mireille-sama, you can count on me."

Milla Bassett whispered softly.

"As a Laurenfrost daughter, I will do everything in my power too."

"Judia..."

Rinslet hugged her other sister tightly who was sitting in a wheelchair.

"Somehow, it feels like the land of Laurenfrost will be fine."

"Yes, with such excellent retainers, I feel there is no need to worry."

Claire nodded in agreement.

Soon, the military ship's hatch opened and a metal gangway descended.

Next to appear was Rubia Elstein in military uniform.

Gazing at Kamito's group below, she said:

"Fianna Ray Ordesia's extraction has evidently succeeded."

"Yeah, except that the Murders merchant arranged by you betrayed us."

Kamito answered her sarcastically.

Back then, had Virrey the special operative knight not assisted them, Kamito and company might still be wandering underground at the imperial capital right now.

"So the Bald Rat betrayed us... The money paid to him should have been more than enough."

"He took the Holy Kingdom's side very readily. Don't put too much trust in people who can be bought."

"—I shall bear that in mind."

Saying that, she turned to Fianna.

"Have you made your decision? Second Princess of the Empire, Fianna Ray Ordesia."

"Yes, I shall serve as your pawn, Rubia-sama—no, Rubia Elstein."

Fianna looked squarely into Rubia's eyes and replied fearlessly.

The Calamity Queen and the Lost Queen—previous best friends at the Divine Ritual Institute in the past, their gazes crossed—

"Very well. A meeting will be held in half an hour. Rest in the ship first."

With a flip of her military jacket, Rubia returned inside the military ship.

"Oh, Nee-sama..."

Just as Claire called out to her... She closed her mouth again rapidly.

"What is it?"

"I still haven't had a chance to talk with you properly, Nee-sama..."

Claire said sadly.

Indeed, despite meeting again at last, the two of them had not had a conversation as sisters.

Although Rubia gave a cold impression as though a single touch could set off her anger, Kamito wondered if that was because he did not know what she was like in the past. Perhaps back when Claire was small, she had been very different from now.

Perhaps a decisive change had occurred to her past self that was familiar to Claire.

...On that day when the insane Fire Elemental Lord had destroyed a town on earth.

"Oh well, no need to be anxious. Before we reach Dracunia, there should be plenty of chances to talk."

Kamito placed his hand on Claire's shoulder.

"Hmm, I have not had a proper chat recently with my esteemed sister either."

"...Y-You're right. I'll try."

Claire nodded and bit her lip hard.

Part 2

Kamito and company got their belongings ready and boarded the ship. Claire shared a room with Rinslet and Fianna whereas Ellis roomed with Velsaria.

Kamito, Est and Restia had one room to themselves.

"Uh, this place, is it...?"

Led by a girl working under Rubia, he opened the door to his assigned room.

"Oh, Kamito..."

Inside the room was Restia, dressed as a maid. She reacted with surprise on her face.

With a small broom in her hand, it looked like she was currently tidying and cleaning the room.

"So you have already arrived. I didn't even notice..."

"Because this room doesn't have windows..."

Kamito rested Est on the wall by the door and sat down on a bed's edge.

Unlike his last time here, the room was different, very cleaned up.

"It was so dirty before but now it's completely different."

"Since I am unable to help out with the ship, I wanted to do some cleaning and tidying at least... I enjoyed it very much."

Restia put down her broom and sat down cautiously next to Kamito. Speaking of which, the corridor had also become sparkling clean, presumably thanks to Restia's cleaning efforts.

"Was it scary for you?"

Kamito asked. To make it easier for Kamito's team to infiltrate the imperial capital, the Revenant had gone to Ostdakia's outskirts to draw

the Imperial Knights' attention. Judging from the crumbling armor, it must have been an intense battle.

"Yes, it was very noisy outside, so scary. Thank goodness the red-haired person accompanied me."

"Rubia?"

It was hard to imagine her doing that based on her icy demeanor. But after seeing that she had taken in the helpless orphan girls from the Instructional School, Kamito wondered if she might actually be very good at looking after others.

(...After all, she even tamed Muir.)

In that case, her attitude to her younger sister Claire became even harder to understand—

"...However, I just had a very terrifying dream earlier."

Restia said quietly.

"A dream? ...What was it like?"

"Inside pitch-black darkness. Inside icy cold darkness where there was nothing and noone. Although I clearly knew it was a dream, I could not wake up... It persisted like that."

Kamito was shocked. He recalled how he seen the same dream the night before.

"Restia... Did you call out to anyone by any chance?"

"...Um, I think I called your name..."

"Really..."

Kamito fell into dep thought and his gaze settled on his left hand in the leather glove.

After waking up from the dream last night, his left hand had hurt. Could it be due to the link from his contract with her, trying to reconnect itself?

Suppose this was a sign that Restia was going to recover her memories, then it was nothing Kamito could want more. However, if her memories as Restia Ashdoll, the terminal of Darkness Elemental Lord Ren Ashdoll, were to awaken, what would happen to *this* Restia?

Perhaps, considering her personal happiness, it might be possible to have her live a peaceful life by leaving her like this without recovering her memories...

"...What's the matter?"

Seeing Kamito suddenly withdrawn into silence, Restia showed a gaze of surprise.

"Oh, it's nothing... Don't worry."

Kamito hastily shook his head—Suddenly, he noticed something.

"Eh, where did Est go?"

Est had somehow gone missing from where he had left her against the wall.

Part 3

After placing her belongings in the room properly, Rinslet left Claire and Fianna to go to the galley on her own. She wanted to prepare a simple breakfast for everyone before the meeting started.

(Minds will be slow without a breakfast...)

Walking along the ship's narrow corridor, she arrived before the galley whose location Claire had told her about—

"...Huh?"

Suddenly, she smelled something burning.

Black smoke was coming out of the galley's ajar door.

"W-What are you doing!?"

Rinslet rushed hastily and pushed open the door.

The stone stove inside the galley was on fire.

Next to the stove, two identical girls in combat outfits were standing expressionlessly.

"Fire." "Yes, it's burning."

They murmured quietly.

Despite there being a pair of strange girls, Rinslet had no time to bother with them for now.

"Th-The ship will catch fire... Come, Fenrir!"

Rinslet hastily summoned Fenrir.

The white wolf appeared out of thin air to open his great jaws, producing a violent blizzard.

The flames disappeared instantly, leaving glittering ice crystals fluttering in the air.

"Wow." "Amazing."

The twins applauded. Their motions were very synchronized.

"W-What are you two doing!?"

Arms akimbo, Rinslet yelled.

"...?" "...?"

The twins tilted their heads together.

They were roughly the same age as Judia, around twelve or thirteen. Judging from their clothing, they were probably Instructional School orphans taken in by Rubia as subordinates.

"Making breakfast." "More people, tried higher heat setting."

"...Are you two normally in charge of cooking?"

Hearing Rinslet's question, the twins shook their heads in unison.

"Normally, the Cardinal does it." "But she seems busy today, so we tried to help."

"I see... That is certainly admirable, but I never expected the Revenant to almost crash and burn from a fire before issuing the declaration of Legitimate Ordesia..."

Having prevented the worst-case scenario, Rinslet breathed a sigh of relief.

"How about letting me take over here?"

When Rinslet asked that...

"Don't butt in." "Outsider help not welcome."

The twin girls glared at Rinslet together.

Although they were children, they were assassins raised by the Instructional School after all. Their gaze were so sharp that Rinslet could not help but feel a chill.

However, she had her own reasons for not backing down. Rinslet could not tolerate another fire hazard on the ship.

"In that case, allow me to teach you out to cook. That would be fine, wouldn't it?"

"..." "..."

Faced with Rinslet's suggestion, the twins looked at each other then nodded at the same time.

"In that case." "Fine."

"Then let us begin with the basics of breakfast, sugar toast."

Rinslet snapped her fingers and Fenrir produced ingredients from his mouth.

"May I have your names?"

"Velka." "Delia."

"Good names. Velka and Delia, I will first teach you how to beat eggs."

"Got it." "Understood."

Several minutes later...

The aroma of sugar toast filled the entire kitchen.

"Smells so good..." "Looks very tasty."

Looking at the frying pan, the twins' eyes were glimmering.

"The secret trick is to let the cinnamon's flavor out... Oh my?"

At that moment, Rinslet spotted Est's lonely figure, standing at the door.

"Miss Sword Spirit, what's the matter?"

It was very rare to find Est walking around alone without Kamito by her side.

"I am the older sister, so I have to be tolerant."

"..Older sister?"

Unable to understand what Est meant, a question mark floated over Rinslet's head.

"By the way, I smelled an aroma. What are you doing, snack person?"

"Uh, my name is not snack person, please..."

Rinslet shrugged with a troubled look.

Est was not the only one. All the spirits living in Areishia Spirit Academy recognized Rinslet as the "snack person" who would share leftover snacks with them, secretly worshiping her.

Est stood on tiptoe to peer at the frying pan.

"I am currently making breakfast for everyone."

"Bean curd?"

"Although it's not bean curd, bacon quiche is delicious too, you know?"

"Then let me help out—"

Est disappeared into thin air. In the next instant, what appeared in Rinslet's hand was—

"This is a... kitchen knife?"

Rinslet widened her eyes.

The silver-white kitchen knife was light as a feather and excellent to handle.

...This was Est's newest transformation, the Demon Slayer Kitchen Knife.

"Th-Then I gratefully accept the offer..."

Rinslet was just starting to gently slice the bacon when—

"Amazing, a gentle push is enough to cut through."

The thick bacon was cut into thin slices in no time. Next were the onions, finished rapidly with flowing motions like running water. The cross-sections were extremely smooth, looking as though one could put the sliced pieces together to make a complete onion again.

"Such incomparable sharpness, I don't tear up at all even when cutting onions!"

Rinslet could not help but exclaim. Behind her, the twins applauded.

"Master, amazing." "The spirit is amazing too."

"—I am a sword spirit. This is nothing."

In kitchen knife form, Est replied indifferently.

...Unbeknownst to Rinslet herself at the time, she had become the third wielder of the Demon Slayer in history after Sacred Maiden Areishia and Kamito.

Part 4

"Jeez, where on earth did Scarlet go?"

Claire looked around while making rounds inside the ship. Scarlet had disappeared without her noticing back when she was arranging her belongings in her room.

"And I wanted to feed her some treats..."

Although she could call Scarlet with a summoning, it would be too much of a waste to expend precious divine power on something like that.

It looked like Scarlet was not inside the ship, so that left the outside. Claire went up the steps to the deck.

Only to see—

"Oh..."

As soon as she opened the door to the deck, Claire was taken aback.

At the front of the ship, she could see crimson hair fluttering in the wind like fire.

This was the image of her back, whom Claire had been chasing after since childhood.

"What's the matter?"

A glare from those silently burning eyes of ruby made Claire feel like running away.

(...W-What's with running away? I have to have a proper talk.)

Claire tried hard to stand firm then looked resolutely into her sister's eyes.

"Oh, umm, uh..."

Nervous, she could not find her words for a moment. Although she wanted to have a proper conversation, faced with her dramatically changed sister, what exactly should she say...?

"Do you have business with me, *Claire Rouge*?"

Rubia spoke at this time. Unlike the gentle older sister from the past, her voice was very cold.

Pierced by the sharp gaze, Claire could not help but look away.

With her gaze settled elsewhere, she could see Scarlet at Rubia's feet, worriedly watching the sisters.

...Speaking of which, Scarlet was very close to her sister to begin with. Back when Scarlet chose Claire instead of Rubia as her contractor, all the retainers at the Elstein household had found it unbelievable.

Under the awkward silence, Scarlet skipped and ran back to Claire's feet. Claire gently picked up the hellcat spirit and took a deep breath.

"N-Nee-sama... I saw Father and Mother at Elstein."

"Is that so—"

Rubia answered without any change in expression.

"...They are both worried about you, Nee-sama."

The parents never bore a grudge against her elder sister.

Even though they did not know the reason why she had betrayed the Fire Elemental Lord to become the Calamity Queen, to this day, they still believed in her—But Claire had not been able to convey this.

"...What meaning is there in telling me this?"

"...Nee-sama..."

Claire was at a loss for words.

However, she mustered her courage and looked up again.

"I hope for the day when I can return to Elstein, together with Mother, Father... and you, Nee-sama, to live together. So—"

"Rubia Elstein is an existence that has already been banished from this world. I have no intention to get involved with the dukedom of Elstein again."

Rubia interrupted Claire.

"Presently, I am the Cardinal who has awakened from Inferno. Also, you are not my sister either."

"...!"

Hearing such merciless words, Claire froze in shock.

The one before her eyes, was truly no longer the elder sister whom Claire knew so well.

Tears appeared in her ruby-like eyes.

"So your soul is still trapped by vengeance directed at the Elemental Lords—"

"...Indeed. Even now, my soul is left to burn in Inferno."

After saying that quietly, Rubia went directly to where Claire had come from. Claire found herself unable to even lift a finger. Just as she passed by Claire's shoulder, she glanced at Scarlet held in Claire's arms and said:

"You still have not fully brought out your contracted spirit's true power—"

"Huh?"

"In order to convey your thoughts, you must take control of commensurate power. Otherwise, there is nothing to say."

"Nee-sa—"

Claire wanted to make her stay, but her voice could not reach Rubia.

With her long and beautiful crimson hair fluttering behind her, Rubia disappeared into the steps leading into the ship.

Hugging Scarlet, Claire stood there motionlessly.

(I-I still haven't fully brought out Scarlet's true power...?)

Held against her bosom, Scarlet looked up at Claire with an expression of puzzlement.

Part 5

Reunited with Restia, Kamito chatted with Restia for a while then made his way to the ship's conference room when it was time. Although he was curious about Est's disappearance, he dismissed it as something that happened often after all. She was probably taking a stroll inside the ship.

"Hmm, what's this aroma I smell..."

He pushed open the conference room's door to look—

"Oh dear, Kamito-san, you are the earliest to arrive."

Holding a pot of black tea, Rinslet turned around.

On the table in the conference room with solemn decor, a very delicious breakfast was laid out.

A mini-salad made from several kinds of vegetables, fluffy sugar toast, spinach and bacon quiche, fresh milk, and fruit yogurt for dessert.

"You made breakfast for us? I'm amazed you did that in such short time..."

Kamito could not help but offer praise.

Thanks to Greyworth's education, Kamito could be considered a cook, but it would be asking for the impossible if he had to prepare breakfast for so many people in such short time.

"I didn't do it alone. It was all thanks to Velka and Delia's assistance."

"...Velka and Delia?"

Kamito asked in response. At that moment...

"Master, the teacups are here." "Master, what do we do next?"

Two identical girls poked their heads in from the gap in the door.

"It's fine now. Both of you worked very hard."

Rinslet patted the two of them on the head.

"Understood—" "Master praised us—"

The twins ran noisily along the corridor after saying that expressionlessly.

By Velka and Delia, she was apparently referring to the twins. Judging from their combat outfits under the aprons, they were probably Instructional School orphans taken in by Rubia.

"That's amazing. I can't believe you totally tamed assassins from the Instructional School..."

Kamito muttered while he sat down. Next...

"Kamito, I helped out too."

"Est?"

Under the table, Est poked her head out.

"What? So you went to the galley, huh?"

"Miss Sword Spirit helped in cutting ingredients."

Rinslet explained.

"No fingers were cut, right?"

"No, I only cut ingredients, Kamito."

Est nodded.

...Kamito never thought Est would turn herself into a kitchen knife.

As though competing against Restia, who was seated on Kamito's left, Est took over the seat to his right.

"Good morning, Miss Sword Spirit."

"...Good morning to you, darkness spirit."

However, when Restia greeted her with a smile, Est also returned the greeting politely.

...Somehow, it felt like Est's relationship with the amnesiac Restia was pretty good.

"Oh my, this is the fragrance of black tea."

Soon after, Fianna and Ellis entered the room.

"Which varieties of black tea would you like, everyone?"

"I would like to have Laurenfrost tea leaves, please."

"Same for me."

"I want to add honey and milk—"

After everyone indicated their preference, the two girls sat down opposite to Kamito.

"Ellis, how's Velsaria?"

Kamito asked the question, since the two of them were supposed to share a room—

"My esteemed sister is recuperating in the room. It seems that she pushed herself too much during the battle against the Imperial Knights."

With a slightly depressed look, Ellis answered.

She had displayed the Elemental Panzer's astounding destructive power back when Kamito's group were imprisoned at the Academy town. Due to its massive strain on her health, its operation time was apparently limited to only a minute, but reportedly, Velsaria had fought with power beyond the limit in order to buy time for Kamito's team to infiltrate the capital.

"...I see. I should visit her later."

"Hmm, if you come, I think my esteemed sister will be happy."

At that moment, Claire entered.

"...?"

Seeing her appearance, Kamito felt strange.

...She did not look too energetic. A bit distracted.

"Claire, what happened? You don't look too well."

Noticing her childhood friend's change, Rinslet asked with concern.

"R-Really? You're imagining it. Just your imagination."

Claire hastily shook her head and answered in a cheerful voice as usual.

"Looks like a very delicious breakfast. Oh, it's my favorite sugar toast!"

(Your acting is a bit fake...)

...Did something happen between her and Rubia?

A while after everyone had sat down, Rubia was the last to appear.

"—All present I see. Well then, let me explain the plan from this point onwards."

Kamito did not miss it. At that moment, Claire had awkwardly avoided eye contact.

Part 6

"—With this, we will cross the border to seek refuge in the Dragon Duchy of Dracunia."

Rubia spoke after taking her seat.

Everyone nodded silently. Since they had already heard about this before infiltrating the imperial capital, there were no questions raised.

"Will it really be okay? I don't want to be shot down as soon as we cross the border."

"Nothing of that sort will happen. We have already reached an agreement with the other side."

"Why Dracunia in particular?"

Fianna asked.

"There are two reasons. First of all, Dracunia's interests are aligned with ours—once the Ordesia Empire becomes the Holy Kingdom's puppet state, the balance of power between the various nations on the continent will be broken. The Dragon Nation is very concerned about that. Secondly, the Dragon Nation has the military might to deter the Empire from making a move. Otherwise, there would be no point in asking them to back us."

So that was the situation. Dracunia was not the only nation opposing the Holy Kingdom. There were others such as the Principality of Rossvale, but without the necessary military power to support them, those countries would not be able to protect the Legitimate Ordesia that existed in name only.

On that level, Dracunia the military state was definitely a reliable choice. Although the nation's overall resources were inferior to Ordesia, the strength of its military power was enough to intimidate its neighboring countries. With internal strife unresolved, even Ordesia would not dare to invade the Dragon Nation recklessly.

"By the way, I can't believe you even had contacts in Dracunia..."

Kamito commented.

"Aren't you backed by the Theocracy and the Demon King Cult?"

"The Theocracy intended from the start to exploit all the value they can extract before disposing of me. Hence, I consider them merely my previous insurance. After all, I know that Dracunia's Dragon King is interested in the plan to assassinate the Elemental Lords."

"What do you mean?"

Hearing that, Kamito frowned.

The plan to assassinate the Elemental Lords—This was Rubia's plan intending to bring about Kamito's awakening as the reincarnation of the Darkness Elemental Lord's power so that he could assassinate the Elemental Lords while entering an audience with them as a Blade Dance victor.

Dracunia's Dragon King had expressed interest in that plan, in other words—

"...The Dragon King is opposed to the Five Great Elemental Lords?"

"Dragon King Bahamut used to command forces on the Darkness Elemental Lord's side during the Spirit War between the Five Great Elemental Lords and the Darkness Elemental Lord. Hence, that king continues to regard the Elemental Lords as enemies."

"The Dragon King is a spirit on the Darkness Elemental Lord's side..."

Looking at the Water Elemental Lord's seal on her left hand from Iseria, Rinslet whispered quietly.

"I see now. It must be for the same reason that Dracunia is opposed to the Holy Kingdom which now holds the Fire Elemental Lord, right?"

"Probably yes... However, the Dragon King apparently has other designs—"

"Other designs?"

"I am not too sure on the veracity of that."

Rubia said.

"However, there is no need to be concerned with that. Regardless, our interests are aligned. So long as we share the Holy Kingdom as a common enemy, we will be able to keep using this nation of Dracunia."

To exploit everything available in order to achieve a goal. Orphans from the Instructional School, militarized spirits, Murders, the Alphas Theocracy, the power of the Darkness Elemental Lord, Restia, Velsaria, and now Dracunia—That was probably her resolve as an avenger.

"Next, I shall issue the declaration of Legitimate Ordesia under Dracunia's protection, is that right?"

When Fianna asked, Rubia nodded calmly.

"Indeed. At the same time, expose and condemn the relationship between Arneus the foolish ruler and the Holy Kingdom. Although the neighboring nations will likely choose to observe for the time being, within the Empire itself, the anti-Arneus faction and some of the neutral nobles will probably respond to us. Ordesia will then become divided into two. We will make use of that chaos and use Dracunia's military power for support to seize the imperial capital back from Arneus' control."

"This will develop into a large-scale civil war..."

"Yes, but you should have prepared yourself already."

"Yes, I know very well..."

Fianna nodded with determination.

"However, with that, it would seem especially regrettable that we were unable to rescue Headmistress Greyworth at the imperial capital..."

Ellis murmured quietly.

Hearing that, Kamito and Fianna looked at each other.

"Yes, if only we could get Areishia Spirit Academy on our side."

"Oh, about that..."

Kamito spoke up. After all, the issue could not stay secret forever.

"What is it, Kamito?"

Ellis asked with a surprised look.

"Greyworth has fallen into the hands of the Holy Kingdom. She's hostile to us now... I think."

"What did you say!?" "What happened!?"

Ellis and Claire widened their eyes. Even Rubia could not help but frown.

"Kamito, what is going on?"

"I don't really know what happened either. It's just that those Holy Kingdom people seem to have done something to Greyworth."

Kamito recounted everything he had seen and heard at the time. Currently, Greyworth looked like a young girl and had recovered the power from her peak condition. The one controlling her was the Holy Kingdom cardinal, Millennia Sanctus, who was there with her.

"No way... The headmistress, I can't believe she became our enemy..."

Claire lamented in surprise.

Ellis and Rinslet were equally shocked, unable to speak.

"Is there any method to undo the headmistress' brainwashing?"

"...None at the moment, but I will absolutely find one."

"However, in the event that you cannot—"

Rubia spoke this time.

"Are you able to kill that Dusk Witch?"

"Well—"

Kamito was rendered speechless. At that very moment...

A loud siren started blaring in the ship.

Part 7

As soon as Kamito and company arrived on the deck, they saw the enemy fleet in formation up ahead.

Three Wvyern-class escort vessels and one Gigantes-class battleship. This lineup was sufficient to shoot down the Revenant, a mid-sized military ship, despite its modifications.

"The Empire's Aerial Combat Knights, huh? They moved faster than expected."

While observing with a cylindrical telescope, Rubia commented.

"So they intend to shoot us down before we cross the border huh..."

"Is there any way to shake them off our trail?"

Rinslet asked.

"We have the advantage in speed, but the fleet has blocked our route of advance. If we make a detour, I fear we may be caught in a pincer attack from additional reinforcements."

"So breaking through is the only way huh..."

Kamito crossed his arms and muttered.

"Does this Revenant have anti-ship weapons?"

"Compared to the battleship on the other side, virtually nil. The remodeling was limited to mobility."

"In other words, we'll be blown to bits in a direct fight."

"Shall I head out to persuade them?"

Fianna suggested then.

Indeed, there were people within the Empire's military that were dissatisfied with the current emperor, Arneus. If they were lucky, perhaps the entire fleet might change allegiance.

"Unfortunately, that probably will not work..."

Ellis interjected.

"Why is that?"

"The flagship's banner belongs to Dame Arakeel of the Numbers. She has a straitlaced personality and therefore extremely loyal to the Ordesian throne. I do not expect her to be swayed."

"Arakeel... That blockhead, stubborn as a rock. Indeed, she is not one to listen to others."

Fianna sighed and shrugged.

At that moment...

"I shall sortie—"

A voice came from behind Kamito's group.

Limping on one leg, Velsaria appeared from the hatch.

"Velsaria, is it okay for you to walk?"

"...Hmph, this is nothing... Cough, huff..."

"Esteemed sister—"

Velsaria groaned in pain, falling to her knees. Ellis rushed over to support her.

"Velsaria Eva, you are in no state to mobilize. If you use the Elemental Panzer now, know that you will turn into an utter wreck."

Rubia declared icily.

"No matter, I am one who has died once already."

Saying that, Velsaria grabbed the Blood Stone hanging on her neck.

"Stop it, you idiot!"

Kamito swiftly caught her hand.

"Ah, ooh... Y-You impudent knave, m-my, m-my hand...!"

Instantly, Velsaria blushed to her ears.

"I will find a solution here. Just leave it to me—"

"By finding a solution... Kamito, what is your plan?"

Hearing that, Claire asked.

"I will assault the flagship and eliminate the commander. Using that opening, you guys find a way to break through."

"It seems that is the only option open to us—"

Rubia nodded in agreement.

"Kamito, you are unable to fly, right? I shall deliver you to the fleet."

"Yeah, counting on you—"

Faced with Ellis' suggestion, Kamito nodded. Back in the Sylphid Knights, he had teamed up with Ellis plenty of times. With her, he had tacit coordination and understanding requiring no need for special training.

"Est, please turn into twin swords this time."

"Yes, I am Kamito's sword, your wish is my command."

Kamito held Est's hand and poured in divine power. Instantly, a pair of swords appeared in his hands, one black and one white. The dual wielding form was comparatively lower in the consumption of divine power and very suitable for chaotic battles on ships.

(...I've got to be careful not to get swallowed by Ren Ashdoll's power again.)

"I-I'll go too!"

Holding Flametongue, Claire spoke.

"Claire..."

"No. As you are now, you will only be a burden."

"Nee-sama..."

Hearing Rubia's cold words, Claire bit her lip hard.

"Sorry, if I had to carry two people at the same time, I will lose mobility."

"...I-I got it, okay."

When rejected by Ellis as well, Claire gave up.

However, Kamito appreciated her goodwill greatly. He patted Claire on the head.

"H-Hwah... W-What are you doing, jeez..."

"Wait for me. I'll finish this quick and be back."

Standing at the deck's front, Ellis summoned her demon wind spirit.

"—Time to depart, Kamito!"

"Yeah!"

Kamito held Ellis' hand and they flew into the blue sky.

Part 8

"Kamito, do not let go of my hand under any circumstance—"

"Yeah, I know—"

Kamito nodded. It would be over if he let go; he would fall straight to the ground.

"O-Of course, I do not mean for a lifetime or anything like that!"

"S-Say what again?"

Weaving through the artillery fire raining down upon them, Ellis controlled wind magic to fly acrobatically. With her amazing speed, she closed in on the formation of ships ahead of the Revenant.

Kamito could see the situation on the enemy decks. Probably not expecting a lone elementalist to attack directly, the Aerial Combat Knights were thrown into confusion. Almost all the knights on the ships were elementalists controlling flying spirits, but in terms of speed, Kamito was going to reach the deck faster than they could sortie.

"S-Shoot them down!"

Standing in formation on the decks, the knights fired countless arrows of spirit magic.

"—Incoming, Kamito, take care not to get shot!"

"Taking care is... Whoa!"

Ellis unleashed wind to further accelerate. She zigzagged in the air to skillfully dodge the curtain of spirit magic projectiles. With his view spinning, unable to tell up from down, Kamito did his best to hold onto Ellis' hand.

Although an arrow brushed past his cheek, scaring him for a moment there—

However, Ellis avoided all attacks perfectly.

"Great job. Ellis, the sky is your domain!"

"But it is impossible to get close to the ship like this—!"

While dodging the second wave of magical projectiles, Ellis cried out. Indeed, if they got stalled here, the Aerial Combat Knights were going to deploy their elemental waffen to intercept them directly.

Even for Kamito, Aerial Combat Knights were not easy to handle.

At that moment, a huge number of magical arrows flew at the two of them...

...were struck down by a rain of arrows coming from behind, exploding in midair.

Kamito looked back, only to see—

Rinslet standing on the Revenant's prow, holding her bow of magic ice.

Unbelievably, she was able to shoot from that distance to strike down every enemy arrow.

She tossed her long platinum blonde hair and made a thumbs-up sign proudly. After the rigors of the Blade Dance tournament, Rinslet's archery skills had improved dramatically.

Tiny crystals of crushed ice spread in the atmosphere, covering the view of Kamito and Ellis.

With the rain of arrows interrupted during this opening, there was no reason not to take advantage of it—

"Now is the moment to charge, Kamito!"

"Yeah, counting on you!"

Ellis swung Ray Hawk in response to Kamito's voice.

"Kamito, hold on to the spear's shaft—"

"Huh?"

"Hurry—"

Kamito did as told and grabbed Ray Hawk.

"Then off you go—"

A rumbling and fierce storm began to gather at the spear tip.

Figuring out what Ellis was intending, Kamito could not help but cry out.

"Hold, are you for real!?"

"Of course. Break through the wind—Fahrengart style of the spear, Flying Strike!"

Ellis used all the divine power in her body to launch Ray Hawk with Kamito holding on to the spear.

"O-Ohhhhhhhhhh!"

The power of the wind, concentrated on the spear, was released all at once, turning it into a projectile of godlike speed.

Strike. The spear tip pierced the deck's surface—In that instant, an explosion occurred.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

With explosive noise, the gigantic ship shook. The wooden floorboards were lifted up in a radial pattern, flying away from the deck with a scattering of debris.

Before the impact, Kamito had already let go to land with a crouching stance.

After evading the shockwave, he instantly stood up.

(...Quite crazy method, but oh well, it is quite efficient—)

While smiling wryly, he swiftly checked out his surroundings. Near the center of the explosion, Aerial Combat Knights had collapsed after getting blown away. They probably did not have enough time to chant defensive magic.

Standing upright on the ship, Ray Hawk turned into particles of light and disappeared.

Ellis' job was done. Next up—

(It's my turn to enter the stage—)

Kamito drew two copies of the Demon King's Sword, wielding one in each hand.

"S-Surround him! "The enemy is only one man!"

One after another, knights not caught in the shockwave began to surround Kamito with elemental waffen in their hands.

However, it was a poor decision.

"Absolute Blade Arts, Third Form—Shadowmoon Waltz!"

The black and white slashes traced out arcs to sweep away the surrounding knights. Easily breaking through the encirclement, Kamito ran towards the back of the military ship.

(Where's the commander?)

While taking down knights in his path successively, Kamito looked for the commander. Logically speaking, Ordesian knights would stand personally on the deck to give directions.

At that moment—

(—*Found her*.)

A blonde knight was standing openly at the bridge.

Despite being surrounded by chaos, she remained firm and unwavering.

Most likely, she was Dame Arakeel of the Numbers.

Sweeping away the glowing projectiles of spirit magic, coming from all directions, Kamito kicked the ground to gain speed.

"Oh? To come forth singlehandedly, how foolish—"

The Numbers knight—Dame Arakeel—laughed lightly and jumped down from the bridge.

"Become strength in my hand—blacksmith spirit Vulcanus!"

While she was yelling, gauntlets with shields merged with them appeared on her hands.

The heavy armor caused the ship's floorboards to sink.

Judging from the form of the elemental waffe, she seemed to be a power-type elementalist.

(I can't waste too much time—)

Kamito closed in instantly and lunged at her torso.

Aiming at a gap between the armor, he swung the two Demon King's Swords.

However, Arakeel instantly readied her shields and effortlessly blocked Kamito's attack.

(I knew it, relatively low-power attacks won't work huh—)

Kamito clicked his tongue mentally. Then—

Arakeel swung her gauntlet-clad fist.

"...!"

Kamito jumped sideways in the nick of time to evade the attack.

However, the ensuing wave of attacks struck him. Kamito was blown away.

(...W-What's with this monstrous strength!?)

Kamito instantly renewed his stance and readied the twin swords.

Arakeel charged with great momentum, unleashing a fierce punch.

Kamito poured divine power into the twin swords, straining to block the punch.

Sparks scattered around instantly.

(...Not bad, it's so heavy—)

Witnessing the power of the Empire's strongest, the Numbers, Kamito could not help but click his tongue.

This was not a punch with strength alone. Instead, it was the pinnacle of martial arts combining offense and defense into one.

"Pretty good, brat. Were you not an enemy, I would have wanted to enjoy this thoroughly."

The heavy knight with the prim and proper face showed a savage grin. It looked like Ellis was right in calling her a straitlaced knight. The impression he got was completely different from Leschkir.

Creak creak creak creak... While blocking the punches whose pressure kept increasing, Kamito spoke up.

"...Say, could you temporarily turn a blind eye to that ship?"

"What now? Are you begging for mercy?"

"Arneus is the Holy Kingdom's puppet. If you have the Empire's interests in mind—"

"Hmph, you are truly blind to attempt persuasion. Every generation of my family consists of knights serving the imperial family. I will take orders from no one but the emperor alone!"

"Like I said, that emperor is—"

"Shut up!"

Arakeel's fist shone with an intense flash of light. It was the glow of massive divine power.

"...!?"

Kamito kicked his opponent's gauntlet to jump back. In the next instant, the fist of destruction shattered the ship's floorboards with an impact strong enough to shake the entire vessel.

(...I get it now. She really is as stubborn as a rock. Looks like there's no way to convince her.)

Kamito jumped onto the ship's edge. Instantly, a rain of glowing projectiles from spirit magic fell towards him. This was not Arakeel attacking but cover fire from the spirit knights.

(It's time to decide the match, or else I'll get completely surrouned...)

While using his twin swords to deflect the rain of magic arrows, Kamito closed in again.

Arakeel's defense was quite solid—Penetrating it was the key.

However, it was not like he could use Absolute Blade Arts repeatedly. The Absolute Blade Arts consumed a great amount of divine power to enhance the body. Once he ran low on divine power, that power of Ren Ashdoll's might start devouring him again.

(—I don't want to become the Demon King again.)

Hence, he had to create an opening sufficient to defeat the enemy. And he already had an idea.

"Assassination technique—Twin Snakes!"

Closing in the enemy from the front, Kamito released a sharp combination of strikes.

"This type of attack is useless against my Vulcanus!"

"Yeah, that maybe true—"

Arakeel widened her eyes.

Indeed, the haphazard slashes from the twin swords were part of Kamito's move for making the opponent *underestimate* him.

Blocking the attack easily, Arakeel was about to counterattack when in that instant—

(—Est, Mode Shift.)

'Yes, Kamito.'

The Demon King's Sword's dual sword form vanished. What appeared in Kamito's hands was the Demon Slayer.

This was the true form of the strongest sword spirit, Terminus Est.

Arakeel's blue eyes widened.

The weapon's sudden transformation made her react a beat too slow.

People capable of using elemental waffen with multiple forms were rare, but those who had mastered dual wielding and two-handed swords simultaneously were almost nonexistent.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Guh...!"

Kamito's full powered strike was blocked by Arakeel hastily with her gauntlets. However, she did not manage to dissipate the impact. An opening appeared in her stance, then—

"Absolute Blade Arts, Sixth Form—Crushing Fang!"

The Absolute Blade Arts move for destroying weapons, which had defeated Hakua of the Four Gods during the Blade Dance, erupted.

The gauntlets blocking the sword were shattered.

"Gah—"

Faced with Arakeel who had lost her defense, Kamito swiftly positioned his blade against her neck.

Then—

"Stop all ships from firing! Otherwise, her life is gone!"

In a voice loud enough to reach the entire deck, Kamito shouted.

"No way, Dame Arakeel has been...!?" "C-Curse him, that male elementalist!"

All the spirit knights surrounding Kamito changed expressions with alarm.

"Forget me! Kill this man—"

Arakeel called out loudly, but her subordinate knights did not move.

—Just as Kamito predicted.

Speaking of Ordesia's Numbers, they were heroes among heroes, idolized by the masses. Furthermore, this knight called Arakeel seemed like she would be deeply trusted by her subordinates.

Besides, this mission was not one that they undertook willingly. The Imperial Knights swore loyalty to the Ordesia Empire, not the imperial family—They would not go so far in following Arneus' orders as to the point of sacrificing Arakeel's life.

The battleship's artillery ceased firing. Soon after, the escort vessels also stopped their cannons.

Using this opening, the Revenant advanced calmly.

While threatening Arakeel with his sword, Kamito walked over to the ship's edge.

"Kamito, over here!"

Claire waved from the Revenant's deck.

Kamito took his sword away from Arakeel's neck and said:

"Sorry about that, let's have a fight, fair and square, next time—"

Saying that, he jumped off towards the deck of the Revenant that was passing directly beneath the battleship.

In an ideal situation, it would naturally be best to take Arakeel along as a hostage, but keeping a Numbers knight in captivity continuously would be quite a challenge. There was a possibility that she might rampage on the ship.

Behind the Revenant, which had gotten past them, the Empire's ships swiftly began to turn around. However, it was impossible for them to catch up to the remodeled Revenant's full speed.

"Well done, Kamito—"

Having returned to the ship first, Ellis raised her hand to high-five him.

"Yeah."

"Seriously, you solved the problem alone..."

Claire murmured quietly.

Carrying Kamito and company, the Revenant flew swiftly between the clouds.

"Very soon, we will be crossing the border into the Dragon Duchy of Dracunia..."

Fianna pointed at the Kelbreth Mountain Range, visible ahead.

Chapter 4 - The Dragon King of Dracunia

Part 1

The sacred peak of the Kelbreth Mountain Range—the tallest mountains on the continent—was also the place where more than half of all dragon species made their habitat.

Apart from red dragons and black dragons, there were also flying dragon types such as wyverns, ground dragons such as geodragons, and subspecies such as drakes. And at the pinnacle were the Demon King Dragon and the Lightning King Dragon, renowned as the strongest extant dragon species.

Weaving between the those precipitous peaks, the Revenant continued its flight.

One could look down at countless dragons gliding between the clouds—

(...In the end, we still had to rely on Kamito.)

Leaning against a railing on the deck alone, Claire sighed.

Seeing Kamito fight amazingly as always, Claire was totally stunned. After all, he had gone up against one of the Numbers, known as the strongest knights of the Empire, and was able to defeat her in short time.

Her sister's words reappeared in her mind.

—You still have not fully brought out your contracted spirit's true power.

(...I guess she's right. At this rate, I'll just end up being a burden.)

Claire had her pride as Kamito's companion. However, that was ultimately limited to the Blade Dance, a competition requiring team effort.

At this rate, she was never going to catch up to Kamito's strength—that of the Ren Ashbell, the Strongest Blade Dancer.

(...I wish to be able to fight alongside Kamito.)

Then once she had acquired enough power so that he could entrust his back to her—

Perhaps she might be able to find the courage to convey the words and feelings she had failed to deliver last night.

(...Now isn't the time to be depressed. I've got to become even stronger.)

Nodding, Claire clenched her fists.

Part 2

The Revenant landed in a military port at the Grand Dracunia, the capital of the Dragon Duchy of Dracunia, located in the mid-levels of the Kelbreth Mountain Range.

Leaving behind Velsaria who was in convalescence, Vivian Melosa and the Instructional School girls, Kamito and company exited the ship.

Compared to the Ordesia Empire's imperial capital, Ostdakia, the climate here was much colder. Walking down the gangway in her maid outfit, Restia instantly shivered.

"Are you okay, Restia?"

"Th-Thanks..."

Kamito took off his uniform jacket and draped it over her shoulders, prompting Restia to thank him.

At that moment, a gigantic shadow appeared overhead.

He looked up to see the Dracunian knights, riding flying dragons.

"That's—"

Kamito had recollections of their appearances.

They were members of the Knights of the Dragon Emperor whom he had fought during the Blade Dance. And riding the especially gigantic black dragon was precisely—

"I did not expect for us to meet again so soon, Kamito."

"Leonora!?"

Kamito could not help but exclaim.

Indeed, this was precisely the one who had assisted Kamito at the imperial capital, Leonora Lancaster.

Leonora jumped down gallantly from the black dragon's back—

"Guests from Legitimate Ordesia, welcome to the Dragon Duchy of Dracunia."

She bowed her head solemnly towards Kamito's group.

"I, Leonora Lancaster, captain of the Knights of the Dragon Emperor, am tasked with guiding Her Highness Princess Fianna and all of you to the castle in accordance with the Dragon King's orders."

"How polite. Thank you for your hospitality..."

Fianna lifted her hem and curtsied with court etiquette in return.

"...By the way, I never thought you'd come out to receive us. Oh well, but I did expect to meet you here in Dracunia."

Kamito scratched the back of his head as he spoke.

"I was the one who volunteered to serve as a guide. Speaking of which, you are so bad. Since you were planning on escaping to the Dragon Nation, why didn't you tell me earlier...?"

Leonora grumbled with a sulk.

Seeing the two of them interacting like that—

"Hmm, what the heck, they seem so close." "There is an air of intimacy!" "Kamito, when did you and Leonora-dono..." "Kamito-kun is an international Demon King of the Night, I see..."

The young ladies behind him started to whisper between themselves.

What the hell, international Demon King of the Night...

"We have prepared a dragon carriage to transport you to the castle."

"Dragon carriage?"

"Well, it is like a horse-drawn carriage, except pulled by a dragon."

Part 3

The dragon carriage presented before Kamito's group was a form of transportation much bigger than a horse-drawn carriage, sufficient for everyone to ride. It was pulled by a wingless dragon subspecies—a gigantic kin of the ground dragon.

After Kamito and company boarded the carriage, it slowly made its way forward.

It looked like a dragon with a massive body and strength but conversely low speed.

The dragon carriage left the military port and advanced along a main road towards the dragon capital, Grand Dracunia. Apart from dragons circling in the sky, the scenery was not too different from that of the imperial capital. However, compared to Ostdakia, the architectural designs seemed more sturdy.

Probably curious about what the streets looked like, sitting next to Kamito, Restia kept looking out the window, asking Kamito about this and that. Kamito was suddenly reminded of how things were like between him and Restia when walking in the streets, except with their roles reversed.

"After reaching the castle, we will first pay respects to the Dragon King."

Sitting opposite to Kamito, Leonora said.

"That makes me feel nervous..."

"Please do not breach etiquette in His Majesty's presence. Otherwise, I cannot guarantee the safety of your life."

Hearing Leonora's warning, Kamito and company exchanged looks.

...On further thought, Kamito realized he knew virtually nothing about the Dragon King.

"Uh, how long ago did the Dragon King begin his reign here?"

"Several hundred years ago."

"That's relatively recent. What was he doing a thousand years ago, during the Demon King War?"

Interested, Claire began to ask questions.

"During the Demon King War, because His Majesty had yet to rule directly, hence he did not intervene in human conflicts. By the way, do any of you know why this nation is called a 'duchy'?"

"...? Oh, now that you mention it—"

Prompted by Leonora's question, Kamito realized it was a bit unusual for a country ruled by the Dragon King to be called a duchy. Normally, one would probably call it a kingdom.

"Far back in history, this used to be a duchy. The current name is a relic from those times."

In the past, the rulers of this Kelbreth Mountain Range was Duke Marfelion, the Dragon Duke, and his descendants. Although the Dragon King was already present in these lands, His Majesty did not actively make contact with humans. Like other high-ranked spirits, the Dragon King was enshrined in a temple as an object of worship.

However, as time went by, the Dragon Dukedom's rule began to enter a gradual state of decline. Foolish rulers who treated the populace as disposable property appeared one after another. Thus, the people gradually came to petition the Dragon King frequently for divine intervention. Finally, in accordance with the people's wishes, Bahamut began to rule these lands.

This happened 475 years ago—Leonora concluded.

"It was said that initially, the idea of a spirit ruling the human realm did elicit opposition. But now that Dracunia's prosperity can be witnessed by all today, I suppose no one will raise any objections again."

While they chatted, the dragon carriage passed through the city and entered a narrow and treacherous mountain path.

A place with sheer cliffs. Worried that the dragon carriage might fall down, Kamito remained apprehensive the whole time.

"How unusual for the main castle to be outside the city."

Rinslet remarked. Indeed, Nefescal Palace was situated in the town center of the imperial capital. Most palaces in other countries were the same.

"Because it was originally not a castle but a temple for worshiping His Majesty the Dragon King. If you think of it as a palace like in Ordesia, perhaps there is a sense of dissonance."

Saying that, Leonora pointed to the pinnacle of the mountain range, visible outside the window.

"Over there is the famous Dragon's Peak."

"Dragon's Peak?"

Kamito asked and looked out the window. The summit was shrouded by thick mist, obstructing a clear view. However, he could see many dragons circling there.

"I've heard that it's home to the only Demon King Dragon on the continent."

"It used to be the lair inhabited by the great dark dragon, Vritra. According to legend, Vritra engaged in widespread destruction and plunder after descending upon the human realm, but a thousand years ago, he was defeated by Sacred Maiden Areishia who had come here, and was thus sealed in a temple on the peak."

"Eh... Hey Est, do you still remember about that time?"

Kamito asked the sword beside him.

"No, it is not in my memories."

Est replied indifferently.

After moving along the meandering mountain path for a while, the dragon carriage reached a great canyon.

A stone bridge had been built across the valley, whose depths were too deep to see. A gigantic structure could be seen on the opposite side, carved out from a cliff.

"Over there is Dracunia's main castle, the Dragon Rock Fortress—commonly known as the Stronghold."

Part 4

"—Greetings, dear guests from Ordesia. Welcome to the Dragon Rock Fortress."

After they got off the dragon carriage at the plaza in front of the castle, female attendants serving at the castle immediately came forth to greet them.

Passing through the massive iron gate, Kamito and company followed Leonora to enter the castle.

"Indeed, the layout is completely different from Nefescal Palace..."

Fianna examined the walls and ceilings and remarked.

Rather than built from stone, it seemed to make use of the original gigantic cavern. The ceiling was designed to resemble stalactites, with numerous spirit crystals embedded to give off light like dazzling stars. Many dragon reliefs were carved on the walls.

"Claire, do not touch without permission."

"I-I know, okay..."

Intending to touch a dragon relief, Claire was warned by Ellis.

(Somehow feels kind of nostalgic...)

Recalling the Instructional School's Cave Castle, Kamito had that thought. That being said, it was not a memory he liked to recall.

"So big."

Claire sighed in admiration.

"People unfamiliar with this place can get lost. Please take care."

"What a dangerous place... Restia, please be careful not to get separated."

"Y-Yes..."

Kamito held her hand, causing Restia to immediately bow her head with a shy expression.

Suddenly, Leonora stopped in her tracks with a surprised look.

"Kamito, don't tell me that you intend to bring your maid along to pay respects to His Majesty?"

"...Huh? Oh, right—"

Indeed, from Leonora's perspective, the current Restia was just a mere maid. Bringing her along for an official meeting would be far too rude.

"Uh, Restia isn't a maid, she's—"

"Hold on—"

—At that moment, Rubia, who had remained silent the whole time, pulled Kamito over by the arm and whispered in a voice too quiet for Leonora to hear.

"It would be best not to take the darkness spirit along."

"Why?"

"The Dragon King was a trusted subordinate under the Darkness Elemental Lord's command. Once her identity is exposed, it might pique the other side's interest."

"...Oh right."

She had a very good point. It might be best to conceal Restia's presence from the Dragon King. Otherwise, in the event that the Dragon King demanded to keep her by his side in memory of the Darkness Elemental Lord, then Kamito would be forced to fight the Dragon King.

"I'm sorry, Restia... Can you wait for me a while?"

"Very well, I understand."

Kamito patted her on the head and Restia agreed obediently.

"The room has been prepared already. Please follow me."

As soon as Leonora gestured, a female attendant immediately hurried over to take Restia away.

They continued to move forward in the cavern. Soon, the group reached a wide open space with a domed ceiling.

The princess maidens in formal attire serving the Dragon King were lined up against the wall in a row to greet Kamito and company.

"This is the throne room?"

"No, the throne room is up ahead."

Leonora shook her head.

"Please make preparations here to have an audience with His Majesty, everyone."

"Make preparations?"

Saying that, the princess maidens walked over while carrying baskets in their arms.

"What preparations?"

"Since you will be entering the presence of His Majesty the Dragon King, you cannot remain dressed like this."

"Do we still need to change into ritual attire?"

Claire made a surprised expression.

The uniform of Areishia Spirit Academy was formal ritual attire that was authorized for high-level ceremonies including the Blade Dance festival. Logically speaking, going in like this to have an audience should not be problem—

"No, it is fine to keep wearing these uniforms. However—"

"However?"

"You must remove your underwear."

"...EHHHHHHH!"

Hearing Leonora's instruction, Claire and the girls all cried out in shock.

Part 5

"R-Remove our underwear, w-what is the meaning of this!?"

"Princess maidens serving the dragons do not wear unclean underwear."

Leonora answered seriously.

(...Oh right, I think I remember something like that.)

Indeed, during the Blade Dance, Leonora had not worn underwear either.

Since walking out in the streets without underwear was dangerous in all kinds of ways, Kamito had picked some out for her.

...It looked like Claire and the others did not know about this.

"L-Lies... Lies, impossible...!"

"H-How can such indecent attire be permissible!?"

"Hmm, as the captain of the Sylphid Knights in charge of public morals, I-I absolute cannot agree to this."

Claire and the girls protested with red faces.

"You must adhere to this rule if you are paying respects to the Dragon King. Once the fact that you are wearing underwear is exposed, His Majesty's wrath would be incurred."

"N-No way..."

Claire and the girls looked at one another with troubled looks.

...As expected, pure maidens like them would feel repulsed by such a requirement.

—At that very moment.

"Obey the Dragon Princess' instructions. *That* is the formal attire in these lands."

Rubia spoke calmly.

Claire widened her eyes and asked:

"N-Nee-sama will... remove your underwear too?"

"I have already done so on the ship."

Rubia declared openly. ...Holy crap.

"...~Oooh... Sigh, fine..."

Claire sighed in resignation.

"Hmm, since it is this country's etiquette, it cannot be helped, right?"

"I-I suppose..."

Ellis and Rinslet also agreed reluctantly.

"I go without them sometimes, so it doesn't bother me."

...Finally the princess apparently murmured something strange to herself. Kamito really hoped he had heard wrong.

At that moment, he suddenly remembered and asked Leonora.

"Say, do I need to take mine off too?"

"What... What do you intend to do after taking them off, you pervert!?"

"What the heck!?"

"Y-You are not some kind of pure maiden in the first place! To think you intend to... e-expose that you-know-what in front of the Dragon King, what sacrilege!"

Leonora shouted with her face red. ...What *you-know-what*?

(Well, that's actually a relief for me...)

"Kamito, turn around. If you dare look back, I'll roast you into charcoal."

"Yeah, got it..."

Glared at by the girls, Kamito turned to face the wall.

After a while—

Rustle rustle. Rustle.

With eyes closed, Kamito could hear the sound of clothing friction behind him.

Say, why do they all have to strip here?

...Even just the sound was enough to make his heart start pounding.

"...Ooh, s-so embarrassing..."

"Hmm, th-there is a strange feeling."

"Oh my, a cat embroidery. That is really cute. Where did you buy it?"

"I-I think you can find it anywhere..."

"I guess it must be the underwear store at the Academy town. Their underwear is famous for being adorable."

"Hwahh, Rinslet, w-why did you say it out!?"

"Hmm, I want to check it out too."

"...A-And you, what's with that underwear? I-Isn't it too sheer?"

"Fufu, I bought it when I returned to the capital."

"Uh, isn't that kind of fabric see-through? Too indecent."

"Is that so? But Ellis, aren't you wearing adorable panties too?"

"Ah, w-what are you doing!?"

"Oh my, isn't this...?"

"Y-Yes, this is the same style as what Ren Ashbell-sama wears."

"—What?"

Kamito turned his back involuntarily.

(...Oh crap!)

In that instant, all the girls froze.

"Hyah!" "K-Kamito-san!?" "K-Kamito!" "Oh my♪"

"S-Sorry!"

Kamito hastily turned his head back.

However, the scene had already been imprinted clearly on Kamito's retinas.

Claire was wearing white panties with a cat embroidery.

Rinslet's was a pair of clear blue panties.

Fianna's was a pair of black lace panties with an adult flavor.

And Ellis was wearing... a pair of panties with cute frills.

...Of course, Kamito had no recollection of ever wearing such underwear.

Presumably, it was one of those knock-offs taking advantage of Ren Ashbell's popularity. Although there were many products in the market that used Ren Ashbell's name without permission, he never expected them to go so far as to sell underwear.

"...J-Jeez, you jerk, what the heck!? Turn into charcoal, charcoal!"

"Kamito-san is dirty!"

"Shameless!"

The girls' piercing gazes stabbed into Kamito's back.

Part 6

"Oooh... As expected, I cannot calm down at all..."

"Hmm, there is a breezy feeling on my legs..."

Leaving the great space, Claire and the girls murmured while walking along the corridor leading to the audience hall.

"After you get used to it, you will find underwear uncomfortable instead."

"This isn't something I want to get used to..."

Claire groaned in suffering.

After walking for a while, they reached a massive iron door at the end of the corridor.

For human use, that door would be unnecessarily big.

"...This is the Dragon King's throne room."

Leonora touched the center of the door with her hand and chanted some kind of incantation in spirit language.

Next, the gigantic door slowly opened inward—

The throne room was a dark hall without any lighting.

There seemed be a large set of steps inside. In terms of structure, it was quite similar to the Elemental Lords' audience hall they had seen at the Blade Dance.

Thud—The door closed behind them with the sound of great weight.

In the next instant—

'—Welcome, humans.'

A bizarre voice was heard as though it were coming from deep underground.

"...!"

Kamito and company held their breaths.

A blinding light appeared at the top of the steps. What then appeared was the silhouette of a gigantic "entity" sitting on the throne behind a large curtain draping down from the ceiling.

That silhouette was like a "monster."

Two gigantic curving horns. Six arms ending in hooked claws. Massive wings with vicious shapes.

The silhouette of a monster like a powerful archdemon was sitting on the throne.

(...That's Dracunia's Dragon King—Bahamut!)

Simply by sitting there, he was already exuding an aura of overwhelming power.

This was an archdemon-class spirit—no, this pressure even surpassed that of mythical-class spirits that only resided in Astral Zero.

"K-Kamito, what are you doing? Hurry and kneel down—"

With Claire tugging on his sleeve, Kamito hastily knelt down.

In front of the Dragon King's terrifying presence, it seemed like almost everyone knelt down involuntarily.

Silence descended.

After that moment, which felt like an eternity, passed—

'—Thou art the princess from the Ordesia Empire?'

The shadow behind the curtain looked down at Fianna, who was bowing at in the front row, and spoke to her.

"Yes, I am the Second Princess—Fianna Ray Ordesia."

Fianna looked up at the Dragon King's shadow and replied.

'—I see. Such excellent spirit in thy eyes. Indeed, thou art of royal blood.'

The Dragon King apparently saw Fianna's aptitude with a single glance.

'—The recent political troubles must have been quite an ordeal for thee.'

"Thank you for your concern. Regarding the assistance extended by Dragon Duchy of Dracunia and Your Majesty, I express my deepest gratitude as the monarch of Legitimate Ordesia—"

Fianna bowed solemnly again. Her elegant and dignified behavior exuded regal airs that one would not expect from her usual upfront and cheerful demeanor.

'Not at all. Supporting Legitimate Ordesia is also in Dracunia's interests. That is all—'

The Dragon King's roaring voice caused the air in the great hall to shake.

'If the current Ordesia Empire were to fall into the Holy Kingdom's hands, my Dragon Nation shall be the next target. Ye existences ought to keep the Holy Kingdom in check.'

—So it was true that the Dragon King regarded the Holy Kingdom as an enemy.

If the Dragon King intended to use Legitimate Ordesia as a card to play against the Holy Kingdom, that would be quite believable.

'Nevertheless, there is one condition before the Dragon Nation pledges to support ye.'

"A condition..."

Fianna looked up forcefully.

Kamito glanced at Rubia but did not see any change in expression. She must have expected the Dragon King to propose terms and conditions.

'Exhibit ye power in a test to see if ye are worthy of our support.'

"...Understood. May I ask what the condition is—"

Fianna asked.

'The Alphas Theocracy was plunged into turmoil when their princess, Sjora Kahn, murdered the Hierarch. Dost thou know of this—'

"Yes."

The Alphas Theocracy's civil war was an issue that concerned all nations on the continent. Kamito had heard that Dracunia had sent a delegation consisting of Leonora and others as representatives at the All Nations Conference at the imperial capital and proposed the military intervention approach. However, due to the attempted assassination incident on the emperor, the conference's progress had stalled—

'Here is the condition I propose to ye—Rescue Saladia Kahn who was imprisoned during the coup d'etat.'

The Dragon King's voice boomed like thunder.

"Saladia Kahn is the Theocracy's second princess, isn't she?"

'Indeed, she is a trump card against Sjora Kahn the usurper. She can serve as a flag-bearer for the resistance army that is currently fighting to the very end. With her in our hand, Dracunia's intervention in the Theocracy would unfold in a positive direction.'

"For us to accomplish that—"

'Indeed. Helping to quell the Theocracy's internal strife would add actual accomplishments to the empty repertoire of Legitimate Ordesia. Once Saladia Kahn taketh back the throne, ye shall receive the Theocracy's support in addition to Dracunia's. 'Tis not an unfavorable condition for ye.'

"...Indeed that is true."

Fianna murmured softly.

The Dragon King's words were very logical. No, more accurately, it was very correct from the standpoint of benefit analysis.

Despite withdrawing from the All Nations Conference, Dracunia probably did not want to conduct military intervention in the Theocracy by themselves. Hence, they intended to have Legitimate Ordesia, which did not belong to any faction, to serve as their vanguard.

In contrast to that monstrous appearance, the Dragon King's methods were wise and worldly. Kamito could not help but click his tongue.

"...I now understand the situation. May I have a moment for contemplation?"

Saying that, Fianna secretly glanced at Kamito and the others, but—

'—Nay. Fianna Ray Ordesia, know that thou art the one to decide as the monarch.'

The Dragon King's voice was defeaning.

Confronted with Fianna's wavering gaze, Kamito nodded lightly in return.

Counting on you—

Fianna closed her eyes then said:

"—We shall proceed as you request, Your Majesty."

Part 7

After leaving the audience hall, Claire exhaled deeply.

"Sigh... Such frightening pressure, that Dragon King..."

"Yes, it took everything I had to maintain a calm voice."

Fianna also held her hand to her chest and sighed. Although she had conducted herself with dignity, she must have felt very afraid inside.

"Now that's what I call a Dragon King."

"Indeed. Although we only saw the silhouette behind the curtain, I might collapse in fear if I saw his true appearance."

"There are hardly anyone in Dracunia's history that has witnessed His Majesty's true form. To be honest, even I have never paid my respects to his true appearance behind the curtain."

"Really?"

Hearing Leonora's admission, Kamito was surprised.

"Yes, it is said that those impudent enough to peek brazenly at His Majesty's true form would never step foot outside the audience hall ever again... However, it is just a rumor."

"...J-Just a rumor, right?"

Kamito's group shuddered intensely.

"By the way, what a difficult condition. I can't believe that we have to intervene in the Theocracy's civil war..."

Supporting her chin on her hand, Fianna said softly.

"There's no need to intervene, right? Don't we just have to rescue the Second Princess and that's it?"

"True, but it's hard to imagine that things would be that easy."

"...You've got a point."

Hearing that, Kamito agreed.

Although the Dragon King had made clear his intention to support Legitimate Ordesia, at the current stage, they still could not trust him unconditionally. After all, there was a possibility that they might get ordered around and used as a guerrilla team unaffiliated with any country, to be exploited for all their value then silenced and disposed of.

It was just that Kamito could not bring himself to say this in front of Leonora, the Dracunia princess—

"By the way, why hasn't Sjora executed Saladia Kahn?"

As a result, Kamito avoided bringing up his thoughts and raised a different topic.

"Indeed, it is quite unbelievable. There is no such thing as mercy for one's kin during power struggles between royals."

Fianna commented sardonically.

In fact, her elder brother Arneus had prepared to execute her on the very day of the Great Festival of the Spirits. To think that cruel Sjora Kahn would keep Saladia alive when she could serve as a flag-bearer for resistance forces, was there any reason behind that...?

"Well, no matter what, we don't have the luxury of choice."

Claire shrugged and shared her view.

"Yes, but if we can't even accomplish this condition that the Dragon King has set for us, recovering Ordesia would be even more of a delusion."

"Conversely, this is an excellent chance to promote our existence to all the other nations."

Ellis made a fist and nodded firmly.

Listening to his comrades, the young ladies, Kamito muttered in his thoughts.

(...The Alphas Theocracy, now that's a country I keep finding ties to.)

It was the country founded by Demon King Solomon. At the same time, it was also the lair of the Demon King Cult that gave rise to the insane facility known as the Instructional School. Restia, while under a seal, had similarly been unearthed from ruins in the Theocracy.

Kamito felt as though destiny was guiding him there.

Something there was waiting for Kamito—

...Inexplicably, he felt this kind of premonition.

Part 8

Back to the plaza, the princess maidens reverently handed back the girls' underwear. While Kamito was facing the wall, the girls swiftly put their underwear on again.

When everyone was ready, Leonora said:

"I have already prepared rooms for you in the castle. Please use them as you wish during your stay."

"I shall pass. I am returning to the ship."

Rubia shook her head.

"You're not staying at the castle?"

When Kamito asked, she replied quietly.

"Next, I am going to retrieve Muir Alenstarl and Lily using the Revenant. Those two are needed for operations in the Theocracy."

"Right... Speaking of which, what are they doing right now?"

He remembered that the last time he asked, she said she had assigned an important mission to them—

"Secretly scouting the Holy Kingdom, searching for the missing Fire Elemental Lord's whereabouts."

"They're in charge of such a dangerous mission?"

"I asked them precisely because the mission is dangerous. Those two are the best subordinates I have."

"That's true..."

Muir and Lily were respectively ranked second and sixth at the Instructional School. In the past, they frequently teamed up with Kamito for missions. Lily was the infiltration expert, enough said, but even Muir, who looked unsuitable for reconnaissance missions at a glance, had an especially keen nose for sensing danger.

Furthermore, in the event that their cover was blown and they came under enemy pursuit, they also had the power to break out by force using the militarized spirits in their possession.

In any case, it was definitely worth relying on Muir and Lily's return. Especially Muir, who could fight a fireteam of spirit knights singlehandedly.

"Be careful—"

"You would do well to prepare yourself too. Do not hold back against the Dusk Witch."

"..."

With that, Rubia turned around to leave—

"N-Nee-sama..."

Claire called out at that time.

"What is it?"

"I will become stronger. Definitely, I will bring out Scarlet's power."

After listening to Claire's words of determination—

Rubia still did not change her expression, however.

"Is that so? As you are now, you are not eligible to serve as my pawn."

"Nee-sama..."

Claire's shoulders shook as she bit her lip in chagrin.

"Hey, putting things that way—"

Kamito could not help but interrupt, but then—

"—Go train on Dragon's Peak. What you need is over there."

"...Huh?"

Claire reacted with surprise.

However, Rubia left without saying anything more.

"Dragon's Peak—Going there will make me stronger?"

"The harsh environment of Dragon's Peak has made it a place for generations of princess maidens to train. However, few people go there to train nowadays—"

Leonora explained.

"Back when I was thirteen, I also asked the dragons in the mountain to train with me. After shutting myself in the mountains for a month and some, I established a contract with the dragon spirit Nidhogg in the end."

...Stuck in the mountains at the tender age of thirteen huh. Although Kamito wanted to make a witty comment, he soon remembered that he had fallen for Greyworth's nefarious scheme back when he was thirteen too, and ended up being forced to spend three months in the depths of the Spirit Forest in an outdoor survival experience.

"...I get it now. Until Nee-sama's return, I will train on Dragon's Peak!"

Claire clenched her fist and declared.

"It is seriously a harsh environment. A single misstep could have grave consequences."

Leonora warned with a solemn expression.

"Perfect. Unless I go that far, I won't be able to fight alongside Kami—b-become stronger!"

Claire's determination seemed quite solid.

At that moment—

"Oh my, how unfair of you, intending to become stronger alone."

With a toss of her long hair, Rinslet remarked.

"Hmm, I feel that I have reached a bottleneck in my own style's training. I cannot keep leaving frontline duties to Kamito and my esteemed sister—"

"I am going as well. I've had enough of being the caged princess."

Ellis and Fianna nodded as well.

"Then I'm also in. It's not like I can leave the hellcat girl alone."

Hearing Kamito say that...

"Th-There's no need for you to become stronger, right?"

"Not true... After all, the opponent is different."

His blade dance in the imperial capital had been an overwhelming defeat.

If he was going to fight Greyworth, he would need power surpassing Ren Ashbell's prime.

However—

"What a shame, Kamito, you can't."

Leonora shook her head.

"Why?"

"Men are forbidden from entering Dragon's Peak. If you dare to trespass, I fear you would incur the wrath of the masters of the mountain, either the Demon King Dragon or the Lightning King Dragon."

"I-I see..."

"However, if you were to cross-dress, perhaps it might work..."

"—Fine, I'm out."

Kamito replied instantly.

Even if they were the Demon King Dragon and the Lightning King Dragon, reputedly the strongest dragons, Kamito honestly did not think they were his match. However, making them go on a rampage would probably hinder the girls' training.

...Furthermore, he somehow felt a sense of camaraderie with the name, "Demon King Dragon."

"Then what should I do...?"

Rubia was heading to the Holy Kingdom, Claire and the girls were going to train on Dragon's Peak, then that left only him and Est in the castle with Restia, the three of them—

"Uh, i-if it is alright with you, I could personally show you around the dragon capital, Grand Dracunia, you know?"

"Huh?"

Kamito responded. Claire and the girls froze with their jaws dropped.

"Given this rare chance, uh, how about some sightseeing around town?"

"Well, I wouldn't want to impose, since you're a princess after all..."

Just as Kamito wanted to decline...

"I-I am obliged to monitor you. If I leave you alone, who knows if you might extend your evil claws towards the female attendants in the castle—"

"Like hell anyone is going to extend evil claws!"

"You won't? This is accurate intel gathered by our military's intelligence agency, the Dragon Eye."

"That Dragon Eye is seriously blind!

Kamito could not help but shout in anger, but...

"Kamito, you really have no self-awareness."

"Hmm, but from others' perspective, you are totally the Demon King of the Night!"

"Such scary obliviousness..."

For some reason, the young ladies in his company stared at Kamito and started to whisper secretly among themselves.

"W-What the hell, you girls..."

Kamito narrowed his eyes in suffering.

"F-Fine, anyway, thanks for being my guide. I happen to be a bit interested in the town."

"I-Is that so, then—"

"Uh, if you don't mind, can Restia—the maid—join us?"

"Hmm... W-Well... Sure, I don't mind..."

Hearing Kamito's question, Leonora stammered somewhat in a dilemma.

"...?"

At that very moment...

"Kamito-sama, your maid is already asleep in her room."

The female attendant who had just led Restia to her room quietly approached and informed him.

"...Hmm? Really? Then I wouldn't want to wake her up."

"I-I agree, waking up someone from their sleep is bad! As an ancient Dracunian proverb says, sleeping dragons must not be roused!"

Leonora kept nodding her head repeatedly. At that moment, Kamito noticed the female attendant giving Leonora the thumbs-up.

...Were they passing some kind of secret signal?

"Th-Then, let us depart. Before the maid wakes up, hurry!"

"L-Leonora, you are pulling too hard..."

Caught by the arm, Kamito was getting dragged away.

"Hmm, Leonora-dono is the carnivorous type huh..."

"This type has never shown up before."

"Kamito-san is going to be eaten!"

"J-Jeez, Kamito is such a jerk..."

Behind Kamito, Claire and the girls glared at him resentfully.

Part 9

In the sky above the Ordesia Empire—

The Holy Kingdom of Lugia's Crusader-class battleship was flying calmly in the air.

Despite being a battleship, the ship's outer appearance differed from ordinary military vessels. Its unique design resembled a church for worshiping spirits, thus earning it the nickname of the "Cathedral."

Cardinal Millenia Sanctus was sitting on a chair in the commander's cabin, talking to someone behind her.

"Oh my, that incompetent emperor seems to have failed again—"

"—Is that so?"

The shadow on standby behind her replied indifferently.

"You are seriously not a talkative girl. Lurie-oneechan is a much better conversation partner."

Millennia pouted with displeasure.

That cute behavior made her look almost like an ordinary child.

"Is it okay to leave the imperial capital?"

"Don't worry, *I left another me there*."

"...?"

Greyworth frowned in surprise but did not pry further.

Millennia chuckled and continued.

"Say, cute little puppet, how was that fight with the boy?"

"What do you mean by how?"

"As your opponent, was he enjoyable?"

"To be honest, still lacking. However—"

Saying that, the witch narrowed her gray eyes.

"I sensed something unknown."

"Hmm, you like him quite a bit."

"..."

Millennia got up from the chair and pressed her index finger against Greyworth's lips.

"Do you still want to fight that boy?"

Hearing that, the corners of Greyworth's lips curled up slightly.

"My blood is boiling—"

She replied slowly.

"Fufu, I love an honest child. What a battle maniac."

Millennia turned and looked back.

"—You may. Swing your sword to your heart's content."

"Affirmative—"

"Fufu, looks like it will be a fun party."

Chapter 5 - Temple of the Dark Dragon

Part 1

Riding on the flying dragon controlled by Leonora, Kamito went to the trading port of the dragon capital of Grand Dracunia. The long journey on the dragon carriage was covered within the blink of an eye by riding a flying dragon.

After tying the flying dragon to a plaza specialized for dragons, Leonora walked towards a bustling marketplace.

"Such a busy place..."

"Because the Kelbreth Mountain Range is a major source of spirit crystals. Even without ships, it is very common here to use flying dragons to engage in trade."

Just as Leonora said, while Kamito was walking through the market, flying dragons carrying wooden crates of goods kept flying overhead in criss-crossing directions.

"Won't they crash into one another?"

"Experienced flying dragon riders won't have those type of accidents. Novices do drop goods occasionally, but the local residents are used to it."

"This isn't a matter of getting used to it or not, right?"

The reason why the buildings here looked sturdier than those in the imperial capital or the Academy town was hopefully not as a precaution against objects dropped from great heights.

"This amount of air freight is already relatively low. On one hand, the Theocracy's civil war has interrupted trade. On the other hand, trade with Ordesia will probably be put on hold for the near future."

"You call this relatively low..."

Looking at the unceasing flow of dragons overhead, Kamito stared in amazement with his mouth open.

Seeing that, Leonora laughed proudly.

"You are overreacting if you get shocked by something of this level. During the annual Flying Dragon Dance Festival, the entire sky will be blotted out by dragons. Now that is what I call spectacular."

"Eh, I'd really like to see that..."

...What kind of scene would that be like? For some reason, Kamito imagined a large swarm of locusts.

"Great, let me be your guide on that occasion as well."

"Sure, thanks."

"Fufu, it is a promise."

—Thus they walked for a while, sometimes looking up at the dragons overhead, other times checking out goods in the market. The two of them then came to a large road under a giant canopy.

On the two sides of the road were shops with fancy signs. The road was crowded with people.

"This is the Dragon's Street—the biggest entertainment district in the dragon capital. You can buy anything you want from general merchandise, craft products to dragon eggs. Apparently, there are also tools for sale for nighttime fun."

"What tools for nighttime fun?"

"Who knows? I don't have a clear idea either..."

Saying that, the two of them strolled casually through Dragon's Street. At an open-air stall on the side of the road, Kamito saw many rare items for sale that could not be found in the Academy town.

"Say, what's that?"

Kamito pointed to a blue egg, large enough for a person to wrap their arms around in a hug.

"A drake egg—a type of small dragon."

"Can you eat it?"

"Of course not. Nobles use them as interior decoration. However, it's possible to make them hatch by using a blazing furnace. Newly hatched drakes are quite cute."

"Small dragons huh? Now I kind of feel like raising one."

Kamito imagined a palm-sized fire-breathing dragon.

"Yes, juvenile drakes are roughly the size of horses and very easy to take care of."

"That's plenty large already."

"Really? I have seven of them at home."

...As expected of a princess of the Dragon Nation. Her standards were completely different.

"If it's no longer possible to keep them, what happens when they go feral?"

"The majority of feral drakes return to the Kelbreth Mountain Range. However, it's just that most of them turn into prey for the bigger dragons."

"What a cruel world..."

Just as the two of them were chatting in front of the shop...

"Oh, are you looking for drake eggs? Excellent taste, good sir."

Smiling cordially, the shopkeeper came outside.

"Oh no, I'm just looking, I don't plan on..."

"What a kidder you are, good sir, amazing. I can't believe you are aiming that high."

Checking out Kamito and Leonora, the shopkeeper smiled suggestively.

"What do you mean?"

"Drake eggs are good luck charms. Rumor has it that a single touch could ensure swift conception."

"What...!?"

Kamito hastily backed away. He glanced around, only to see the surrounding people smiling at the two of them as though they were newlyweds.

"You didn't know?"

"O-Of course I didn't. L-Let's go..."

"Oh...!

Kamito grabbed Leonora's hand and hastily left that place.

Only after leaving Dragon's Street did Kamito finally stop walking. Leonora glared at Kamito with her face bright red.

"Y-You, do you always go around holding girls' hands this casually!?"

"S-Sorry..."

Kamito let go in a panic.

"Oh no, it's not like I mind continuing like this..."

Leonora instantly stammered.

"Uh, after running around, I feel a little hungry..."

"Hmm? Oh, that's true... How about finding a place to have lunch?"

"W-Would you like to go there?"

Leonora pointed to a shop whose sign depicted a gigantic dragon.

"Dragon steak... Don't tell me they sell dragon meat?"

"Of course not. They use cattle raised on mountain ranches."

"I see..."

Kamito breathed a sigh of relief.

"It's just that they grow to the size of dragons."

Part 2

—While Kamito and Leonora were casually sightseeing in the dragon capital...

Claire and company were walking up a mountain path leading to Dragon's Peak.

Although the flying dragons of the Knights of the Dragon Emperor gave them a lift until the middle of the mountain, the rest of the way to the pinnacle had to be journeyed on foot because of the thick mist as well as the large number of violent dragons living there.

...After a while of walking up this steep mountain path, the surrounding mist started to thicken gradually.

It was clearly daytime yet visibility was extremely poor. It was hard to see even a couple of steps ahead.

"...Next up, which way should we go?"

Claire looked around.

"Although Nee-sama said that what I need is here—"

At that moment, Scarlet suddenly meowed then ran off in a certain direction.

"Wait, Scarlet! Going off on your own is dangerous!"

Chasing after Scarlet's tail, waving in the mist, Claire followed.

Soon, she found a set of stone steps in front of her.

"There are steps in this kind of place?"

Claire cocked her head and looked up.

"What happened, suddenly running out... Hmm?"

At this moment, Ellis and the others caught up and noticed the steps too.

"Where does this lead?"

"I am very curious..."

"Let's go up to have a look."

Chasing after Scarlet, Claire and company began to climb the steps.

After ascending roughly three hundred steps—

"...W-What is this place?"

The group had arrived at a stone temple covered in moss.

The architectural style was different from what was commonly seen all over the continent. It looked very ancient.

At the temple's entrance, Scarlet was sitting still.

"The air is very murky..."

Fianna frowned. With especially keen senses as a princess maiden, she was particularly sensitive to impure air.

"Leonora-dono did not mention this place—"

"Scarlet, how did you know about this place?"

Claire asked Scarlet at her feet.

Scarlet's behavior just now as almost like she was leading the way for Claire's group.

However, logically speaking, this should be Scarlet's first visit to this place too.

"—Let's check out the inside."

Claire stepped into the temple apprehensively.

—At that moment...

"What fools dare to disturb my peaceful slumber—"

"...!"

Suddenly, something's shadow appeared before her eyes—

Frightened, Claire pounced onto Rinslet beside her.

"W-What, w-w-what!?"

"—O light!"

Fianna hastily recited spirit magic to illuminate the surroundings.

What they saw before them was—

"...Huh?"

Claire could not help but freeze in surprise.

That creature(?) was hovering at Claire's eye level.

It was a palm-sized round black creature.

On the ball-like body were round limbs and a horned lizard's face.

...On the back was something that might count as a tail.

The mysterious creature crossed its arms and puffed out its chest in midair.

"...W-What is this weird creature!?"

Claire cried out with her twintails standing up. Since a deep voice with great solemnity had sounded in the dark, she was expecting something far more terrifying.

"You are the fools who are disturbing my peaceful slum—Hey, what are you doing? Stop that!"

"What the heck is with you? How dare you scare me!"

Claire grabbed its tail hard, instantly causing the strange creature to make lot of noise.

"Let go, Claire. It is definitely this place's guardian spirit or something."

"Bullying spirits will bring bad karma."

After Fianna and Ellis said that...

"Ehhh, what kind of joke is that!? I am not some kind of guardian spirit!"

The weird creature struggled free of Claire's hand and roared angrily.

"I am the dark dragon Vritra who used to rule this Kelbreth Mountain!"

"...Hmph."

Claire and company showed eyes of despise at the same time.

"...W-Wait, aren't you surprised? This is the legendary dark dragon, you know!?"

Probably failing to get the expected reaction, the weird creature began to panic.

"Say, could you be realistic if you're going to lie? Who's going to believe an unbelievable claim that a weird creature like you is actually the legendary dark dragon? If you don't explain honestly, I'll roast you into charcoal."

While lighting flames of spirit magic on her palm, Claire glared at the mysterious creature.

(Well, now that it's mentioned, it does look a bit like a dragon...)

This creature might be what a black dragon looked like if you shrunk it to a small size then kneaded it like clay.

"I-I am not lying! This is merely a false appearance I use to deceive perceptions. If I were to recover my former power, I could swallow you lot whole in one bite!"

The mysterious creature roared in anger.

"...Sigh, whatever."

Claire shrugged and answered. Just as Fianna pointed out, this was probably something like a dragon spirit that lived in the temple. There was no time to waste on humoring it.

(I have to find the way to become strong as soon as possible...)

Ignoring the mysterious creature that kept causing a ruckus, she was just about to leave when—

"...Curse you, foolish lower lifeforms. The Fire Queen who came before you knew her manners much better."

"...!?"

Suddenly hearing that, Claire and the girls could not help but halt in their steps.

"You... What did you just say?"

"Foolish lower lifeforms—"

"After that. You said something about a Fire Queen coming here?"

Claire pursued the matter.

"...How long ago was that?"

"U-Umm, roughly three years ago. No, it might have been four..."

"Three or four years ago..."

Claire rested her chin against her hand in contemplation. The timing matched the period when Rubia had betrayed the Elemental Lords and was working secretly behind the scenes as the Cardinal.

"Nee-sama came here...?"

Claire's murmurs leaked out.

"Did you say 'Nee-sama'?"

Hearing that, the mysterious creature went "hmm" and examined Claire's face.

"Yes, you are that girl's sister! I see now, there is definitely a resemblance. I remember her saying that you are going to visit one day, sooner or later—"

Bouncing around while circling Claire unceremoniously, muttering to itself.

Claire looked down at Scarlet by her feet.

...Speaking of which, what had her sister been doing with Scarlet on the Revenant's deck that time?

(...Could it be that she was telling Scarlet about this place?)

Hence, Scarlet had led Claire and company here?

...Indeed. Even Leonora, who had trained before on Dragon's Peak, did not know of this location. Then surely, this was not somewhere that could be reached by chance.

In that case—

"Uh... Are you seriously the dark dragon Vritra of legend?"

"I already said so just now!"

"But—"

Claire recalled how Leonora had said that the dark dragon Vritra ruling the Kelbreth Mountain Range was exterminated by Sacred Maiden Areishia a thousand years ago.

(...Wait, did I remember wrong?)

In fact, yes. What Leonora had said was:

—Vritra was defeated by Sacred Maiden Areishia and sealed in a temple on the peak.

"...Then could this temple be—"

"Indeed, this is precisely the temple where my mortal enemy Areishia sealed me."

The dark dragon Vritra crossed its arms conceitedly and replied.

Part 3

"Yes, it happened a thousand years ago—"

The creature calling itself the legendary dark dragon looked out into the distance and began to recount.

"Why is it narrating when no one asked...?"

"Shush, just listen and don't interrupt."

Rinslet silenced Claire.

"As a powerful dragon spirit, I led the dragons and spirits of Kelbreth Mountain to bring wanton destruction upon the lower realm. Back then, Demon King Solomon had brought virtually all lands under his rule but no army of the Demon King could ever defeat me—"

"Ehhhh, that's amazing—"

While eating snacks that Rinslet had prepared in advance, Claire concurred.

—However, what then appeared was precisely the Salvation Army led by Sacred Maiden Areishia. The Salvation Army routed the dragon army and ascended the Kelbreth Mountain peak, Vritra's stronghold. The people of the lower realm all rejoiced to see the notorious dark dragon coming to an end.

However, Areishia's power was not that strong at the time, hence the powerful Vritra defeated her army and succeeded in capturing her.

"Are you really speaking the truth? The Divine Ritual Institute never taught this."

Fianna asked skeptically.

"Guaranteed. During my prime, even that Dragon King took care not to offend me."

Vritra answered with overwhelming vigor.

"However, I made a grave mistake at the time."

"...Mistake?"

"Yes, meeting defeat at my hands, the sacred maiden depleted her divine power and the sword turned back into its original form as a spirit. Intending to take the powerful sword spirit into my possession, I touched her foot."

"Oh..."

Hearing that, Claire and the girls looked at one another.

"For some reason, that seemed to incur the sword spirit's wrath. In the next instant, my arm and a wing had been sliced into two—"

The dark dragon Vritra began to shudder.

"I do not remember clearly what happened next, except that I was thoroughly beaten up, escaping back into this temple of my residence, barely alive. However, that was a poor decision. An isolation barrier was deployed around the temple. In my weakened state, I was sealed by the sacred maiden."

"So that was how you became like this."

Rinslet said with pity.

Its appearance was supposed to be more humongous and terrifying originally. However, after being sealed in a de-powered state, Vritra turned into this strange dragonoid shape.

"...Well, I understand the story now. What an ordeal."

Saying that, Ellis patted Vritra's head.

...It looked like this was the temple where the dark dragon was sealed, no mistake.

However, there was no point in dwelling on the details of what happened to the dark dragon—

"Then why did Nee-sama come here?"

Claire asked.

"Hmm, that Fire Queen arrived here on a certain stormy night. Due to the mist barrier deployed by the sacred maiden, ordinary people usually cannot find this place. However, through her unusual intuition, she found the location of this temple."

"Rubia-sama used to be known as the top Queen of all age—"

Fianna murmured quietly.

"The Fire Queen had suffered severe injuries and was apparently under pursuit."

"Back then, both the Divine Ritual Institute and Ordesia's knights were searching for Nee-sama. So it was because she hid in this place, protected by the sacred maiden's barrier, that they lost her trail..."

"That girl stayed here for many months to undertake princess maiden training. As it so happened, I was lacking a conversation partner too. Those days were such a delight..."

—The dark dragon kept nodding as though remembering that time fondly. Although spirits had no concept of time, after being sealed in this kind of place for as long as a thousand years, it was probably hard not to feel lonely.

"I see..."

Claire murmured with a complicated expression.

The past Rubia in Claire's memories was very gentle, considerate and approachable. Back when she was staying at this temple, it was possible that she had yet to become the current Cardinal, consumed in her quest for carnage.

"So Nee-sama trained here..."

Saying that, she looked around the temple's dim interior.

However, this decrepit temple did not look suitable for a princess maiden's training no matter what.

What exactly did her sister do to obtain such potent power...?

"How did Nee-sama train? We want to become stronger."

Claire approached Vritra and said with a pleading expression.

"...Hmm, become stronger huh?"

Vritra mused.

"Indeed, I cannot sense power from you on that girl's level. The hellcat seems to be a powerful spirit, but has not released its rightful power at all."

"..."

Hearing the same thing as what her sister had said, Claire was instantly plunged into despair.

Seeing like that, Vritra closed its eyes for a while before—

"You lot, follow me—"

It turned and moved deeper into the temple.

"...?"

Claire and company looked at one another.

Part 4

"Say, where are we going...?"

Following the hovering Vritra in the lead, they walked along a passage leading to the depths of the temple—

Then they encountered a square room with High Ancient carved all over the floor in front of them.

"...This place is?"

"An ancient historical site. I've read about similar ones in the library of the Divine Ritual Institute..."

Fianna murmured in interest.

"Indeed. This historical site dates back to antiquity as a device for Elfim princess maidens to increase their ability to commune with spirits."

Vritra nodded proudly.

"Then Nee-sama was training here?"

"Yes. Her goal was probably this historical site from the start."

"What kind of training did Rubia-sama do exactly?"

Ellis asked. A training enthusiast, she looked like she could hardly contain her excitement.

"I do not know the details. However, the girl said it was not ordinary training. This is a place for people to confront the value of their own existence—"

"The value of your own existence..."

Claire murmured with a wondering look.

"Uh, Mr. Dark Dragon, may we use this place?"

Rinslet asked.

Next, Vritra looked away as though embarrassed.

"Hmph, in recognition of the Fire Queen who stands as the only one in this era to establish ties of friendship with me, I shall lend this place to you. After all, it was part of the contract with that girl—"

"...Contract?"

"None of your business. Very well, how about it? Use it if that is your wish, otherwise, leave this temple immediately!"

Vritra snarled angrily.

"Then we will use it with graititude. You are surprisingly nice."

"...What? I-I am the evil dark dragon!"

Claire patted it on the head, prompting Vritra to open its mouth and breathe small flames.

"Fine, make haste and enter the room!"

At Vritra's urging, Claire and the others stepped into the square-shaped room.

Instantly, reacting to the divine power of princess maidens, the High Ancient covering the floor began to glow.

"...W-What is this!?"

In the next instant—

Claire and everyone else turned into particles of light and vanished.

Part 5

That dream, encountered again.

Inside darkness, I am alone with my jet-black wings closed, waiting for a certain person the whole time.

I—

No, *her*—

A duration hundreds, thousands of years long, like an eternity—

Have I been waiting in this darkness the whole time?

The seal branded on the left hand.

Glowing faintly in the darkness, it was her last remaining hope.

(...Who on earth are you waiting for?)

Inside the dream, I asked her—

As one might expect, I did not receive an answer.

"...Mm, mm..."

At that moment, Restia woke up.

(That dream again...)

...Recently, she frequently had this dream about waiting for a certain person in the darkness the whole time, *her* dream.

It was clearly a dream but preserved especially vividly in her memory...

—Suddenly, Restia noticed an alarming change.

(...Where is this?)

She had clearly opened her eyes but her surroundings were shrouded in darkness, just like the dream.

She remembered she had been taken to a room in the castle, to lie down on the bed and sleep.

This place had neither windows nor glowing orbs hovering at the ceiling for illumination. Instead of a soft bed's mattress, her back was resting against an entangled mess of tree vines.

(...Why am I in this kind of place!?)

Restia frantically tried to get up, but—

"...Ah, ow...!"

Her arms and legs were immobilized. Vines were restraining her body.

The more intensely she struggled, the tighter the vines bound her.

"...Kami... to..."

Restia called his name hoarsely.

Chapter 6 - The Seductive Leonora

Part 1

"What excellent flavor."

Leonora rapidly ate seven steaks and licked her lips with satisfaction.

"Wow, you're quite an eater..."

"The dragons of Kelbreth Mountain are able to swallow entire oxen effortlessly."

"But you're not a dragon..."

Kamito could not help but retort.

Leonora became embarrassed.

"Umm... Do you dislike girls who are big eaters?"

"No, it's not like that at all..."

Kamito found it a soothing sight to watch girls enjoying delicious food.

"Really...? Thank goodness."

Leonora was relieved.

"Then let us go for dessert next."

"You're still gonna eat!?"

"Didn't you know that desserts go in a separate stomach, Kamito?"

Leonora tilted her head slightly.

...It was rare for elementalists to be overweight. Presumably, controlling her dragon spirit required plenty of calories.

After that, they walked around randomly through the vendors along Dragon's Street. After trying out one of Dracunia's famous specialties, shaved ice made from meltwater, enjoying dragon buns that exploded with juices from a single bite, they went to watch dragon fights between ground dragons at a plaza.

"This is really exciting..."

Watching dragon fights for the first time, Kamito could not help but praise in admiration.

"My ground dragon at home has emerged victorious in three dragon fighting tournaments."

Leonora said proudly.

"You keep ground dragons at home too huh..."

Preparing all the food must be quite a chore... Kamito thought to himself.

In the plaza's vicinity were many craft stores opened for attracting sightseeing tourists. Kamito went to one of them, intending to get presents for Restia who was waiting at the castle, as well as Claire and the others.

"This ornament made from a processed dragon horn is very popular, you know?"

"Won't the dragon be angry for getting its horn cut off?"

"Pretty much all horns are taken from dragons that had died in wars. Although there are many fakes too."

Leonora scrutinized the talismans and accessories on display at the shop seriously.

"Everything here should be real."

"I see. Then I'll buy this hairpin for you, Leonora."

Kamito picked up a dragon-shaped hairpin.

"A gift... for me!?"

"Yeah, think of it as thanks for showing me around town. Although it's nothing expensive..."

"Not at all, thank you very much."

Leonora accepted it carefully and replied with an intense blush.

"This is actually my first time receiving a gift from a man..."

For Restia as well as Est, who was currently in sword form, Kamito bought mini-pouches made from water dragon skin. For the girls training on Dragon's Peak, he got them amulets crafted from dragon scales, choosing the colors based on their respective preferences.

He decided he would bring Claire and Ellis along next time to learn about Rubia and Velsaria's preferences instead of buying the gifts right now. Velsaria aside, he had totally no idea what Rubia would like.

Finally, Kamito bought a pair of earrings made of dragon teeth. The incredible jade-like hue and luster was *her* favorite color.

(...Come to think of it, I've never given her a decent present before.)

When he was younger, Kamito had always been in a rebellious phase. Back then, he never thought about buying gifts for anyone around him.

The facility that had raised Kamito never taught him something this important.

The ones who had taught Kamito human emotions were Restia and—

(What she taught me was more than sword skills...)

Kamito looked down at his hands.

—Are you able to kill the Dusk Witch?

Rubia's words on the flying ship flashed through his mind.

Part 2

While they were hanging out in the plaza, the sun gradually set...

"It's time we got back to the castle. Restia will worry about us when she wakes up."

"I suppose you're right..."

Leonora said with slight disappointment.

"...Then to finish up, let us have a ride on that."

"That?"

Leonora tugged Kamito's sleeve and pointed at the dusk sky.

Kamito looked up to see a group of flying dragons in the air, transporting giant boxes with windows. The boxes were decorated luxuriously. At first glance, they looked like fancy carriages except without wheels.

"What are those?"

"Dragondolas, a form of transportation used for aerial tours. It gives passengers an overlooking view of Dracunia's scenery. I recommend you try it once."

"Looks pretty fun, then let's have a go."

"Very well, I will take you to the boarding platform."

Leonora took Kamito's arm and walked over to the boarding platform for the Dragondolas.

While having Kamito wait at the entrance, Leonora started negotiating with the staff. During this time, Kamito looked at the Dragondolas with great interest.

Some of them imitated the shapes of dragons, some looked like temples for worshiping spirits, others had floors made of glass. Dragondolas truly came in all sorts of varieties.

Leonora returned after the negotiations.

"Can we get one?"

"Yes, the one we will ride is that Dragondola—"

Leonora pointed at the sky. At that moment, a Dragondola resembling a small castle slowly descended.

"That's quite an extravagant one..."

"Its design is based on an ancient castle in Ordesia."

Leonora opened the door of the descended Dragondola.

Then—

"This is..."

Seeing the interior, Kamito could not help but gulp.

First to enter his view was the large canopy bed set up in the middle of the room. Decorated with exquisite relief carvings, it was like the beds used by royals and aristocrats.

The walls were light pink with spirit crystals embedded for illumination. The ceiling even had a gigantic round mirror embedded.

"It's like a palace..."

Kamito commented.

"Yes, I selected the most luxurious royal room."

"Are you sure this is okay? It looks very expensive..."

"I am a princess of this nation after all. This is nothing at all. Besides, th-this is my first time, you know? Anything less would be unacceptable."

"Your first time? That's quite surprising..."

Kamito frowned.

"Is it very surprising? I regret that you gathered that impression."

Leonora went red and pouted.

"Sorry..."

Hmm, on further thought, since she can ride a dragon spirit, of course she doesn't need to use Dragondolas. There's nothing to be surprised about.

"Are you very experienced?"

"Oh no, it's my first time too..."

"I see... That is good to know."

For some reason, Leonora breathed a sigh of relief.

"However, there's no place to sit."

"Why not just sit here?"

Saying that, Leonora patted the bed.

"...Well, I guess."

Seeing Leonora sit apprehensively on the bed, Kamito took a seat on the edge.

(Urgh, I can't shake the weird feeling from sitting side by side on a bed like this...)

After they sat down for a while... The room began to shake intensely.

Two flying dragons were supporting the gondola and started spreading their wings to fly.

"It's shaking quite a lot..."

Kamito looked out the window a bit nervously.

"It starts out shaking quite a bit but soon stabilizes."

The Dragondola carrying them flew higher and higher.

"A-Are there any falls?"

"Don't worry, Dragondolas are much safer than horse-drawn carriages."

Just as Leonora said—

The shaking gradually lessened, turning into a comfortable rocking.

Looking out the window from the bed's edge, he could get a full view of Dracunia's streets tinted with the color of the sunset.

"I see, now this is quite spectacular."

Kamito praised in admiration.

"Yes, the overlooking view of the street from a Dragondola is very pretty after all."

"Isn't it your first time on a Dragondola?"

"...? No, I have ridden them many times—"

(...Then what did she mean by first time just now?)

Kamito frowned.

"Speaking of which, the first time I met you was in the sky too."

"Yes, that time... That was when you were trying to chop off my you-know-what."

Kamito nodded with a wry smile. It had happened during their journey to Ragna Ys, the competition venue for the Blade Dance. Leonora had boarded their flying ship and drew her sword against Kamito, trying to castrate him.

"Please erase that from your memory..."

Leonora looked away in embarrassment.

(...The Blade Dance. It feels so long ago now.)

Meeting Claire and the others at the Academy, Fianna's transfer, the battle against Velsaria—Kamito could not help but reminisce about his days fighting alongside his comrades in Team Scarlet.

Soon, the Dragondola reached the cloud layer and started to descend slowly. After the recent period of turbulent events, this was a rare moment of peace and relaxation.

"Thank you so much for today, Leonora. I had a really good time."

Kamito thanked Leonora sincerely.

"Really? I am very glad to hear that..."

Leonora smiled.

"Then it is time to begin—"

"...?"

Kamito was puzzled.

(...Begin?)

What on earth—Just as Kamito was about to ask...

Leonora forcefully grabbed Kamito's shoulders and pushed him down on the bed.

"Leonora!?"

Kamito frantically tried to get up—

(...I-I can't move?)

His arms were being held down tightly.

...Such powerful arm strength.

"...W-What are you trying to do!?"

Through that military uniform, her soft bosom was pressing against him, making Kamito flustered.

"Fufu, even if you surpass me in swordsmanship, I am still unbeatable in a pure contest of strength. After all, the princess maidens of the Lancaster family have Dragon Blood."

When she was using dragon attributes to enhance her body, even Kamito would be rendered helpless in such a situation. At the same time, the ceiling's lighting turned pink while the the bed below also started rotating.

"W-What's going on!?"

Kamito was plunged into confusion. He could neither figure out why Leonora had suddenly assaulted him nor why this bed would suddenly start rotating...

—At that moment, Kamito suddenly realized something.

From the mirror on the ceiling, he could see Leonora's bottom, clad in pantyhose.

The skirt of her military uniform had already slid down to her thighs, thus showing him a full view of what ought to be underneath.

Kamito blushed red and turned his gaze away.

"So embarrassing..."

While Leonora was keeping Kamito pinned down like this, sweet breath escaped from her lips.

"What the heck do you want..."

"Kamito, you promised me at the imperial capital, didn't you? Anything I want—"

"Yeah... I definitely said that."

—Indeed, he had undoubtedly said that. *Anything you want, as long as it's in my power.*

Leonora began to strip shyly. She really was not wearing any underwear. Her massive bust became exposed.

"...!?"

Next—

"In that case... Let me have your baby."

Leonora whispered in Kamito's ear.

"What the heck are you talking about!?"

"Babies conceived in the sky are known as Dragon's Treasure, a very auspicious event."

Her sweet voice echoed in his ear.

"Or... Do you hate doing it with me?"

Leonora made a sad expression.

Could it be that the Dragon Blood in her body had started going out of control like during the Blade Dance? No, it did not seem like it.

Her eyes were black as usual.

"H-How did things turn out like this!? I am totally lost!"

"...I-I don't know either!"

Leonora cried out, her face red.

(Did her shame turn into anger!?)

Despite thinking that, Kamito did not say it aloud.

"W-Whenever I look at you, my heart pounds nonstop and I feel very weird. Ever since the first time we fought, it has been like this the whole time—"

"Leonora..."

Seeing her about to cry, Kamito could not help but close his mouth.

"All this time, I have been thinking about why this is happening. Every day, almost unable to sleep, always thinking about you... Now, I have finally figured it out—"

Leonora stared at Kamito.

"This is my instinct, stemming from the Dragon Blood I inherited, wishing to obtain your powerful seed!"

"Wait a sec, what's with that crazy leap of logic!?"

Kamito could not help but retort.

Back at the imperial capital, when she said that it would be troublesome if Kamito were to die, was she referring to this?

Although Kamito wanted to run away, Leonora's hands did not budge the slightest... Or rather, if he moved recklessly, his face would get buried in that bosom, which would be too dangerous, hence he did not dare to move at all.

"Give it up, Kamito. The dragons of Dracunia will do everything in their power to obtain what they want."

"C-Calm down! You're thinking too much like a dragon!"

Just as Kamito cried out like this—

"...!?"

Suddenly, he felt a searing pain on his leather-gloved left hand as though burned by fire.

"—Ah, gah..."

"...Kamito?"

Noticing the change, Leonora relaxed her grip.

"...Urgh, ah... Guh... Urghh..."

"...W-What is going on?"

Seeing Kamito in pain, Leonora asked with concern.

However, Kamito could not even speak properly.

The searing pain felt as though a scorching brand was pressing on his body.

Amid this intense pain—

Kamito instantly realized a certain possibility.

(...Is Restia calling for me!?)

Part 3

"...Where is this?"

Surrounded by blinding light, just as she was about to lose consciousness—

Claire slowly opened her eyes.

This was not the altar at Dragon's Peak where Claire and her friends were at just now—

"No way... This place is..."

Claire could not help but widen her ruby-like eyes.

A flourishing forest. A magnificent stone castle built on a hill.

Claire was currently standing before the front gate of the Elstein castle that she knew so well.

Looking at the plains at the foot of the hill, she could see the duchy in prosperity. The wheat in the fields were bountiful while herds of cattle and horses roamed the plains. Looking towards the river, she saw a cottage with a water wheel grinding wheat while it turned.

In her childhood, Claire loved to watch this scenery from a window in the castle.

(...Why am I here?)

She looked around here. Ellis, Fianna and Rinslet, who were with her just now, could not be found anywhere.

Had they been teleported elsewhere?

A place for people to confront the value of their own existence—That was what the dark dragon Vritra had said.

(...But why show me all this?)

Claire went through the castle gate and stepped into the garden.

Inside the castle, nearby residents were preparing for a grand festival. In the center of the garden was a large number of wine barrels. A grill prepared for roasting meat was also lit already.

Seeing this scene—

(...It's *that day*.)

Claire remembered.

On that day, the young Claire had played with Scarlet while enjoying the banquet that started in the evening.

On that day, everyone firmly believed that it would be a peaceful day as always.

That they would continue to lead stable lives—

"...Oh no... Everyone, hurry and run!"

Claire cried out.

However, no one could hear Claire's voice. None of the people present noticed Claire's existence.

"...Why? ...Why show me this!?"

At that moment, the sky changed dramatically.

Rather than the color of the setting sun, they were crimson flames for incinerating everything to oblivion—

Next, a rainstorm of fire began to fall.

The scenery before her eyes was instantly surrounded by flames and burned to oblivion.

"Stop it! Stop it, why does this have to happen!?"

At that moment—

"—These are the consequences of which I am responsible."

"...!?"

Hearing the familiar voice, Claire looked back forcefully.

Over there was her elder sister, standing like a ghost with fluttering long red hair.

Rubia Elstein—No, it was the masked Cardinal.

"...No, it wasn't your fault, Nee-sama—"

"Back then, I lacked the power to stop this tragedy. Had I possessed greater power at the time, I could have eliminated the Elemental Lords to prevent this tragedy—"

At that moment, a sword enveloped in crimson flames appeared in Rubia's hand.

Godslaying flames—the elemental waffe of the strongest flame spirit, Laevateinn.

"Nee-sama, don't—!"

Claire cried out desperately and blocked Rubia's path.

Those were the flames of revenge. They were the flames of destruction that were going to incinerate herself to oblivion.

"Move aside, Claire Rouge—"

Rubia made a thrust at Claire using Laevateinn.

"Absolutely not. I will stop your revenge right here, Nee-sama—!"

Claire chanted a summoning incantation and a flaming hellcat appeared at her feet.

Chapter 7 - The Dragon King's True Form

Part 1

Under the setting sun, the Kelbreth Mountain Range was shrouded by the dusk glow.

Noticing the alarming reaction on his left hand, Kamito immediately stopped the Dragondola aerial tour and rode Leonora's dragon spirit back to the Stronghold.

Next—

"Restia has gone missing?"

Back to the castle, hearing the court ladies report, Kamito was dumbfounded.

"W-We are terribly sorry! We never thought this would happen—"

The court ladies hung their heads in trepidation. Reportedly, one of them had found the room empty when going in to check on Restia.

Right now, they had mobilized everyone to search the castle, but no signs of her had turned up yet.

(Restia...)

Kamito looked at his leather-gloved left hand. As expected, the burning pain was a message that something had happened to her.

The pain was already gone, but that was no guarantee that Restia was safe and sound. Rather, there was the opposite interpretation.

(...What the hell happened? What happened to Restia?)

"It is possible she got lost in the castle. After all, this Stronghold is extremely huge."

Leonora said in a nervous voice. In contrast to when they were alone together, she had switched back to a serious soldier's countenance.

"The Knights of the Dragon Emperor and I shall search outside the castle from the air."

"Yeah, thanks—"

After Kamito nodded, Leonora took her subordinates and went outside.

"W-We will continue searching inside the castle!

The court ladies bowed again and left the room.

"..."

Kamito examined the inside of the room again.

The room was not particularly messy.

Naturally, it would be best if she was simply lost in the castle, but—

(...Could someone have abducted her?)

Then a worrying thought surfaced in his mnd.

The Holy Kingdom's Sacred Spirit Knights had secretly tried to capture Restia on Ragna Ys and in the Laurenfrost forest.

Although this place was under the control of the Dragon King who was hostile against the Holy Kingdom, considering the precedents in Ordesia, it would not be surprising even if one or two spies had infiltrated. Also, the current Restia was an ordinary girl unable to even protect herself, not a powerful darkness spirit.

(But even so, there's something weird...)

Feeling a sense of dissonance since just now, Kamito tilted his head to think.

According to the court ladies, no one in the castle had seen signs of Restia.

Whether going out on her own accord or abducted by someone, to disappear from inside a castle where there were so many eyes—Was that even possible?

The court ladies said they had mobilized everyone to search for her.

Most likely, every room in the castle had been checked.

(If this isn't enough to find her, that means—)

At that moment, Kamito suddenly realized something.

There was one place inside the castle that the court ladies absolutely would not search.

It was a sacred and inviolable place that no one was allowed to step foot into—

(No way...!

Why had he not noticed immediately?

He should have realized that possibility from the start.

"Damn it—"

Holding the Demon Slayer, Kamito rushed out of Restia's room.

Part 2

In front of the corridor leading to the throne room, Kamito was stopped by the castle guards.

"Please let me pass—"

"No, even guests may not pass through here without permission."

An armed guard was glaring at Kamito with eyes of skepticism.

Yes, there were guards here. Normally speaking, Restia could not have walked inside on her own.

However—

"May I ask if you've seen a girl in a maid outfit coming here? She's with me—"

"No, we never saw anyone like that."

"Really..."

He could see nothing suspicious in the guard's attitude.

...He truly *had not seen anything*.

(...Right, this was just my own speculation after all. I might be wrong.)

Suppose he had guessed wrong, this would probably cause Dracunia to withdraw their assistance.

However, back at the Instructional School, Kamito had witnessed Restia do the same thing to ordinary people many times. And considering the case of a mythical-class spirit far more powerful than Restia, wielding legendary power only second to the Elemental Lords—

It would not be impossible to summon Restia remotely in her sleep then manipulate the memories of witnesses—

He should discuss this with Claire and the girls first, but time was of the essence in the current situation. After all, he did not know what would be done to Restia.

"Sorry, please take a nap first—"

"What?"

The guard before him frowned in surprise.

In that instant, Kamito punched the guard's armor with a fist enveloped in divine power. Caught unprepared, the struck guard fainted on the spot.

This was an assassination skill from the Instructional School. It was enough unless the opponent was an elementalist.

"W-What are you doing—Uwah!"

Before the other guards could finish speaking, Kamito moved swiftly and knocked out everyone present.

With that, he raced down the corridor leading to the throne room.

Next, arriving at the gigantic door at the end of the corridor—

Kamito drew the Demon Slayer, intending to break the door.

However, just as he was about to swing his sword...

"...What!?"

Rumble... With a sound like an earthquake, the door opened inwards.

As though inviting Kamito inside—

(...My movements are being watched.)

Kamito muttered mentally then stepped inside, carrying the Demon Slayer.

As soon as he entered the throne room, the door slowly closed behind him.

(Okay, let me see if what comes out is a demon or a dragon—)

Using the sacred sword's glow, Kamito went straight into the darkness.

At that moment, he noticed some kind of gigantic entity moving restlessly in front of him.

Kamito raised the sacred sword to illuminate what was before him.

Only to see—

"—Restia!"

Kamito could not help but exclaim.

What had entered his view was precisely—

Entangled by strange tree vines, the unconscious Restia.

There was peaceful expression on her face as though she was in deep slumber.

"...Dragon King, what have you done to Restia!?"

Kamito shouted. In that instant...

Light shone down from the ceiling, projecting the gigantic Dragon King's shadow on the curtain.

'Perfect timing, O human who hath inherited Ren Ashdoll's power—'

With roar-like growl, the Dragon King's shadow began to move—

The curtain hiding his true appearance was slowly drawn open.

"...What!?"

Kamito was instantly rendered speechless, stunned on the spot.

Part 3

Meanwhile...

"Even if she left the castle, she should not have gone too far—"

Riding the pitch-black dragon spirit, Leonora murmured while looking down at the ground.

The Stronghold was surrounded by vertical cliffs. Leaving this place would require crossing the stone bridge spanning the deep canyon.

The guards stationed at the bridge could not possibly have failed to notice the sight of a girl.

(...By the way, who exactly is she?)

She did not seem like an ordinary maid—Leonora wondered.

—In fact, the Knights of the Dragon Emperor led by Leonora had been attacked during the Blade Dance by Nepenthes Lore who was accompanied by Restia, but because Restia had hidden herself at the time, Leonora never saw her.

(...S-Sure enough, she must be Kamito's beloved concubine, right...?)

Suddenly, Leonora recalled what had happened in the Dragondola earlier, prompting the face to heat up involuntarily.

(...I-I might have been too forceful there.)

She sighed.

Despite enduring her shame to ride that type of indecent Dragondola—

When she mustered her courage to attack, Kamito looked totally frightened.

Sure enough, demanding seed right off the bat was too unseemly. No wait, before that, it might have been wrong to eat seven steaks in Kamito's presence. That was originally meant to show how little she ate—

...Perhaps Kamito already hated her. No, he should not be that kind of man, perhaps he is simply keeping a bit of distance—

Her mind was filled with regret.

"...Why am I getting so unsettled over him?"

The more she thought about Kamito, the harder it was for her to think straight.

She originally thought that it was the Dragon Blood's instinctive desire for powerful seed that caused her to become consumed by lust—

(But actually, it's a bit different from that, right?)

...Totally confused, her presence of mind was disrupted by uneasy feelings.

(...R-Right now, I must concentrate to find Kamito's maid!)

Shaking her head in an attempt to drive away unnecessary thoughts, Leonora returned her gaze to the ground.

—At that very moment.

The pitch-black dragon carrying her growled in warning.

"...? Nidhogg, what's the matter?"

Leonora narrowed her eyes in surprise.

She noticed a petite figure next to the stone bridge by the cliff.

"—Isn't that—!?"

Part 4

(...W-What is going on?)

Seeing that appearance that differed so much from his expectations—

Kamito stood there frozen with his mouth gaping.

Revealed by the Dragon King's drawn curtain was—

A beautiful maiden, entangled by countless writhing tree branches.

Crimson eyes with seductive charm. Long, faintly phosphorescent hair the color of lapis lazuli. Skin whiter than pearl. Slender arms and legs as delicate as a doll's.

A maiden with otherworldly beauty—As much as he wanted to use this description, it was clearly evident that she was not human.

On the sides of her head were two beautiful horns.

Surrounded by the writhing branches, the completely naked girl looked down leisurely at Kamito.

Seeing the fully nude beauty before him, Kamito would normally look away in haste—

However, he even forgot to breathe, completely mesmerized by the sight.

Such was precisely the extent of the maiden's beauty.

"What's the matter? Spacing out like that—"

A sweet voice came from the girl's lips.

"...W-What are you—"

Kamito finally spoke.

"I am the king of Dracunia. The dragon spirit—Bahamut."

The girl slowly introduced herself.

"What—"

Kamito was instantly at a loss for words.

Feared by all the nations on the continent, the strongest dragon spirit—Dragon King Bahamut.

To think that Bahamut's true appearance was that of a beautiful maiden, so delicate and frail—

For a moment, Kamito even forgot his anger from Restia's abduction, rendered speechless.

"Fufu, if you keep staring intently, I'm going to blush."

"...Oh, uh, sorry...!"

Realizing he was staring at a nude maiden, Kamito looked away, blushing intensely.

"Feel honored. Areishia is the only human who has seen this appearance of mine. You are the second person in history."

Saying that, the girl used vines to cover up her nakedness while smiling mischievously.

"A-Are... you really the Dragon King...?"

Confounded, Kamito asked.

Indeed, it was relatively common for high-ranked spirits to take human form—

Est, Restia and Iseria, the Water Elemental Lord, all looked like young maidens.

In that case, was the monstrous gigantic shadow that Kamito and company had mistaken for the Dragon King actually a stand-in made using entangled branches—?

(...Wait, why do I care about that right now?)

Only then did Kamito regain his senses.

"What are you planning to do with Restia!?"

He readied the Demon Slayer in both hands.

Depending on her answer, he was prepared to fight, even if he had to take on the Dragon King.

However, the girl sitting on the throne did not show any anger—

"I simply intend to restore her memories as Restia Ashdoll."

That was her answer.

"Restore Restia's memories?"

"Yes. To think you would draw your sword instead of showing gratitude, how unreasonable."

"Why are you doing this? What are your intentions in restoring her memories?"

Kamito continued to question. Although he also hoped for Restia to recover from her memory loss, it was possible that this girl had ulterior motives—

"No particular intentions. It is just that I am obliged to look after her. This is my duty as the trusted subordinate of my liege, a certain lord—"

"...A certain lord?"

Kamito cocked his head slightly—

He recalled what Rubia had said on the ship.

"You mean Ren Ashdoll... Right?"

"Indeed, the creator of the darkness spirit Restia Ashdoll—"

The Dragon King, who looked like a girl, directed a benevolent gaze at Restia who was sleeping among the trees.

The powerful dragon spirit Bahamut had fought as Ren Ashdoll's trusted subordinate against the armies of the Five Great Elemental Lords. Despite the defeat in the war and Ren Ashdoll's demise, did she still intend to express her loyalty to Restia who was left behind?

Kamito did not know if she was speaking from the heart, but—

"You're not going to harm Restia, right?"

Kamito asked just in case.

"That goes without saying. Also, I would have done it long ago had I the intention."

"...That's true."

Kamito muttered.

"Now that you understand, I hope you could put away that sword properly. Although she has lost her original power, for spirits who experienced the Spirit War era, she elicits trauma regardless of faction."

"...Oh, sure, I got it."

Kamito slowly lowered the Demon Slayer.

Terminus Est, the strongest sword spirit, was apparently feared by even the Dragon King.

"However, a spirit like you should be able to destroy me within the blink of an eye, right?"

Kamito spoke while in trepidation inside.

After all, the other party was the Dragon King whose power was second only to the Elemental Lords. Being able to wipe out Kamito in an instant would be nothing unusual.

However—

"That is not true, unfortunately."

The Dragon King shook her head slowly.

"...Huh?"

"I can neither leave this castle nor exert my full power outside its premises. I am truly powerless—"

"You can't leave the castle?"

Kamito asked in surprise. Indeed, it was well-known that Dracunia's Dragon King never appeared in state-level conferences or ceremonies—

Hearing that, the Dragon King smiled with fragility—

"Yes, it is thanks to this contemptible curse cast by the Earth Elemental Lord—"

She moved her body slightly within the vines.

Instantly, the writhing vines restrained the girl's arms and legs.

"...!?"

"This is the Earth Elemental Lord's curse. Bound to this land of Dracunia, I can neither leave this place nor return to Astral Zero—"

"No way..."

Unable to find words, Kamito instantly fell silent.

Supposing this curse dated back to the Spirit War, then—

This girl had spent several thousand years all alone in this kind of place.

That loneliness was impossible to imagine for Kamito no matter what, given his limited lifespan—

At that moment, an idea suddenly occurred to Kamito.

"Oh right, maybe I can use Est's power to lift the curse—"

"The sacred maiden who came here a thousand years ago also did the same thing."

The Dragon King shook her head.

"Sacred Maiden Areishia?"

"Yes... However, she failed. The curse was too strong and it corroded her health as the sword spirit's contractor—"

"I-Is that what happened...?"

Kamito bowed his head and gritted his teeth. Sacred Maiden Areishia had taken on the curses accumulated in Est, causing her to turn into stone after defeating the Demon King.

"Fufu, no need to make that kind of face. Even thousands of years are nothing to a spirit. Furthermore, life watching over humans has been rather interesting."

The Dragon King shrugged and looked at Restia.

"Today is truly an excellent day. I am finally able to contact the one my lord left behind—"

Cradled by vines and branches, Restia slept with a peaceful expression.

"Restia is still Restia, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"...Uh, is she currently still a spirit?"

Kamito asked.

From his perspective, rather than transformed into a human appearance—

Restia felt like she had been reborn completely as a human girl.

"...Well..."

Hearing that, the Dragon King contemplated for a moment—

"Indeed, the way she is now, perhaps she might be considered human like the rest of you."

"..."

"However, it is a borrowed body after all. She has simply lost her traits as a spirit because she has been separated from her true body in Astral Zero. Once she recovers her memory and reestablishes her link with Astral Zero, she should recover a spirit's power—"

"Really...?"

Kamito looked down at his leather-gloved left hand. In that case, even though the spirit seal had vanished, the spirit contract itself that was established with Kamito still had not been annulled?

"Can her memories be retrieved?"

"I will try everything I can. It is the least I can do out of loyalty to my lord."

The Dragon King nodded slowly.

Kamito held Restia's hand gently.

...Currently, that was all Kamito could do.

Watching him like that, the Dragon King chuckled and smiled tenderly.

"—You really love that contracted spirit, don't you?"

"...What!? Cough, cough..."

Kamito choked so much that he kept coughing.

"Dear me, I was only kidding. To think you would go that red, how cute—"

The Dragon King giggled in delight.

"C-Come on, you..."

However, Kamito could not bring himself to get angry at that adorable face, smiling innocently...

Was this really the terrifying Dragon King with the booming voice?

"Then what about Leonora?"

"...W-Why are you bringing this up!?"

Surprised again by another shot out of left field, Kamito was shaken.

After all, something like that had just happened with her. Kamito could not help but recall the sensation of that extremely bountiful bosom, causing his face to instantly heat up.

"Seriously, she already tried so hard and you are Casanova too."

"...Don't tell me, you saw what happened just now!?"

Kamito could not help but shout.

"Yes, I borrowed the eyes of the flying dragons that were carrying the Dragondola."

"Gah..."

It was most likely Far Sight magic for sharing a familiar's vision. Even though she was unable to step foot outside of the castle, a mythical-class dragon spirit was still not to be trifled with.

"She is quite awkward, so she can't even distinguish her own feelings clearly."

The Dragon King spoke with a wry smile.

"Why not take Leonora? She comes from a good family, her personality is upfront, a very fine girl indeed. And her breasts are huge too... Ah, or perhaps you like them small?"

A vine had stretched out to him unnoticed and poked Kamito in the side.

...Despite being curse, it seemed like she could control them to some extent.

"L-Leonora is a very attractive girl, of course, but... Hold on, I have no intention of that at all."

Kamito replied somewhat glumly.

"Then which of the four do you intend to marry?"

"M-Marry...?"

The Dragon King smiled mischievously.

"As the king of Dracunia, I'd like to recommend Leonora, but if I had to choose among them, the Ordesia princess is not bad. She looks quite reliable. If necessary, you can become the emperor of Legitimate Ordesia too—"

"C-Cut the nonsense!"

"That ponytail girl has quite a large bust too. I expect her to be the type that is more loyal and devoted than anyone once she falls into love. The hellcat girl is a bit dishonest with her feelings, but she does have a cute side. Oh, and that blonde girl is no good. Despite her prim and proper elegance, she is in cahoots with my mortal enemy the Water Elemental Lord—"

(Th-This fricking dragon spirit...!)

Kamito mentally clutched his head.

No good, at this rate, he was going to get caught in her pace...

"Ahhh, so definitely amusing, you humans—"

After saying a bunch of stuff, she smiled contentedly.

Then she put on a serious expression again—

"Hey, why do think a spirit like me is ruling this country as king?"

"...?"

Indeed, there were no other known cases of a spirit ruling a country in the human realm. Ordinary spirits would not take much interest in the human realm.

"I hope to understand the race known as humans more deeply. This is in order for me to know why my liege, Ren Ashdoll, took an interest in your kind, to understand her feelings—"

"Ren Ashdoll took an interest in humans?"

Kamito asked. It was his first time to hear about this.

The dragon spirit girl nodded in response.

"Ren Ashdoll sensed some kind of potential in mankind. Hence, on the brink of demise, she entrusted a portion of her power to them. Instead of the powerful races of the dragons and giants, she entrusted it to you humans—"

"..."

Kamito looked down at his own chest.

Why had she—the Darkness Elemental Lord—caused what was known as the Demon King's power to reincarnate in humans? Now that it was brought up, he definitely found it unbelievable.

"Initially, I only started observing mankind in order to understand Ren Ashdoll's feelings. But during the process, I gradually came to love the fragile race called humans and fell in love with this country of Dracunia. They are almost like my own children—"

The Dragon King smiled with gentle eyes. However, Kamito sensed a faint smidgen of what seemed to be loneliness in her serene expression.

No matter how much love she poured out, human lifespans were limited after all. How many of her children had this dragon spirit girl witnessed passing away from her vantage point in the castle?

And because she needed to maintain her dignity as the Dragon King, she could only show her true appearance to the sacred maiden a thousand years ago and Kamito, the Darkness Elemental Lord's reincarnation.

"..."

Kamito looked up at the Dragon King and said:

"Let me stay here for now until Restia wakes up. I could drink tea with you and chat."

"Fufu, unfortunately there's no tea... Ah, though there is tree sap if you want to drink it."

"I'll pass..."

—Just as Kamito shrugged...

"...!?"

The Dragon King's calm expression suddenly turned serious.

The seductively charming crimson eyes narrowed, gazing into the distance.

"Looks like something ominous has come—"

She said in an icy voice.

"...Something ominous?"

"Yes... I sensed the presence of filthy darkness."

The Dragon King closed her eyes as though transferring her consciousness somewhere far away.

Then she said something shocking—

"—That girl... Could she be the Dusk Witch?"

"...What!?"

Kamito widened his eyes.

Part 5

The color of dusk covered the Kelbreth Mountain Range's sky.

At the only bridge across the canyon between the Stronghold and the dragon capital—

A gray-haired maiden was standing there, holding a demon sword the color of blood.

Facing off against the young girl was Leonora with the gigantic Dragon Slayer in her hand.

Her entire body was exuding astounding killing intent.

"State your business. I don't recall ever inviting you to the castle."

Leonora said quietly.

"You are the dragon rider at the imperial capital huh—"

The Dusk Witch murmured expressionlessly and took a step forward.

"My purpose is to behead the Dragon King."

"Is that so? I never knew there existed such upfront assassins."

The killing intent released by Leonora expanded all at once.

"No matter how many comes, none shall pass here."

"I intended to push through by force to begin with—"

The witch smiled.

Chapter 8 - Mountains of Corpses, Rivers of Blood

Part 1

The footsteps of numerous soldiers running echoed in the Stronghold's canyon.

Rushing out of the throne room, Kamito went through the corridor with the Demon Slayer in hand.

(I can't believe she's storming in through the front door by force...)

The sweat of anxiety appeared on Kamito's forehead. If the invader was really her, then no matter how many soldiers this place had, they might seriously all become wiped out.

—The Dusk Witch.

There was even a legend dating back to the great war about her destroying a small nation singlehandedly.

He really hoped it was just a legend—

(I have to make it in time—)

Kamito ruminated over what the Dragon King had said to him before he left the throne room.

Save Leonora—That was her request to him.

He needed no one to tell him to do that—

The castle gate was already opened. Wielding elemental waffen, waves of dragon knights sortied successively to intercept the invader.

They were the knights of Dracunia the military state. Every one of them should be quite accomplished in their own right.

However, the noise of weapons clashing showed no signs of subsiding. The Dragon Nation's knights, renowned as the strongest, were unable to stop one mere person—

'—Kamito, I sense that demon sword.'

Est's voice sounded in his mind.

"I see..."

Kamito whispered.

—Sure enough, it was her for sure.

'—Please be careful. That demon sword has grown stronger than before.'

(Even stronger than last time huh—)

While groaning in his heart, Kamito rushed out of the castle.

The sun had set completely. The sky was dominated by the color of night.

Crossing the canyon was a great bridge.

Standing in the center was that figure of hers.

The gray-haired maiden swung her sword like fierce god of war, spreading blossoms of blood everywhere.

At her feet, the corpses of beheaded dragons were piled high.

Dyed bright red by the blood splattered all over her body, the girl cut down attacking dragons one after another.

Whenever the flash of her sword tore through the night sky, a dragon's head would fly off into the depths of the bottomless abyss—

Seeing such a scene of cruel slaughter, Kamito even forgot to breathe for a moment.

Flying in the air, none of the dragon knights of Dracunia could approach her. They were frozen stiff in their weapon wielding poses.

"Still not enough. As expected, the girl earlier was the tastiest—"

She mercilessly crushed the head of a roaring dragon underfoot—

The girl licked her bloodstained demon sword.

At that moment, Kamito felt an ominous premonition.

The girl earlier—She had said these words.

No way, did she mean—

In the next instant, what entered Kamito's view was the worst-case scenario.

Next to the pile of dragon corpses was Leonora collapsed in blood.

"Leonora!"

With a great shout, Kamito rushed over reflexively. Standing on the pile of corpses, Greyworth caught sight of Kamito and muttered "oh?" without making a move.

Kamito ignored Greyworth and rushed over to Leonora's side.

"Leonora! Hang in there, Leonora!"

"...Kami...to?"

Her bloody lips moved faintly.

(...She's still alive!)

Kamito cradled her limp body in his arms and poured divine power into her. Although the only effect was to promote natural healing, at least it would be better than nothing.

From her right shoulder to her left waist was a deep slash.

This was a serious debilitating wound. The reason why she was still conscious was surely due to the protective effects of dragon spirits, which reinforced their contractors' bodies.

"...How, unsightly... Right...? As a, dragon knight of... Dracunia..."

"Enough, don't speak—"

Kamito hugged her head gently.

However, Leonora desperately moved her lips, speaking intermittently.

"...Kamito... at the imperial capital, you promised, right... you will do anything."

"Yeah."

"...Then, *I am begging you*... Protect the Dragon King, protect Dracunia—"

After listening to these words that took Leonora's full effort to speak—

"—Understood. It's a promise."

Kamito answered clearly and concisely.

Leonora smiled radiantly before closing her eyes in serenity.

Carrying Leonora in his arms, Kamito lowered her onto the ground behind him.

"That girl still hasn't died? What amazing vitality—"

Standing on the dragon corpses, Greyworth looked down at Kamito and said.

Gripping the Demon Slayer tightly, Kamito glared angrily at her figure, all red from splattered blood.

"Did you come to kill the Dragon King?"

"—Indeed."

Making no effort to conceal her purpose, she nodded in confirmation.

Having obtained the Dusk Witch as a pawn, the Holy Kingdom looked like they had no further use for conspiracy and strategy. They could now openly send out the strongest assassin.

"I won't let you kill the Dragon King. Dracunia is allied to my side, Legitimate Ordesia."

In front of the dragon knights, Kamito declared.

However, his reason for saying this was not simply for the sake of appearances.

Dragon King Bahamut loved the people of Dracunia and sincerely loved mankind. Over her millennia-long period of solitude, she had been watching over this country.

Although he had only chatted with her very briefly—

Her feelings, cherishing the wellbeing of her people, had definitely reached Kamito's heart.

He must protect her. Kamito's heart was filled with this pure emotion.

Furthermore, more importantly—

(Leonora asked me to. That's reason enough already—)

Holding the Demon Slayer in both hands, Kamito poured in divine power from his entire body.

The blade of steel shone with silver-white light, illuminating the darkness of the night.

In response...

"—A rare treat. Blade dancing with you especially makes my blood boil with excitement."

Greyworth smiled.

Her aura changed. It was neither killing intent nor intimidation.

A bizarre aura was given off from her entire body—

Kamito felt as though an ice-cold hand was gripping his heart—

(...Damn it, I can't believe I'm shaking—)

Kamito grimaced mentally. The overcoming of fear was supposed to be the basics of the basics for an Instructional School combatant—

'—Kamito, are you alright?'

Est's voice sounded in his mind.

As expected of the strongest sword spirit, she seemed completely unafraid of the Dusk Witch.

As though responding to Est's voice, Kamito forcefully gripped the sacred sword's hilt.

Greyworth was holding the crimson demon sword casually, jumping down from the pile of dead dragons.

The bloodstained demon sword pulsated like a living creature.

—In the next instant, Greyworth swept the space behind her using that sword.

"...!?"

CRASH!

With a flash of the crimson sword, the stone bridge collapsed instantly.

The mountain of dead dragons fell as a result, tumbling into the bottomless canyon.

She had cut off her own escape route.

"D-Damn it, I can't believe you did this to the dragons that are this nation's protectors!"

"O guest from Ordesia, we will aid you!"

The dragon knights behind Kamito shouted in anger.

However—

"Stay back unless you want to die—"

Kamito turned his head back and glared sharply at them.

His gaze of killing intent made the dragon knights tremble.

"Sorry, you girls will just be a burden."

Kamito said in an icy voice.

"B-But if you go at it alone—"

"Don't get in my way. Please. Take Leonora and leave."

—Be a burden. That was true in a way.

Indeed, perhaps with their support, the battle would go more favorably. However, that was founded on the assumption that he could use them without regard for their lives.

If they were to fight the Dusk Witch, major casualties were certain. These girls were Leonora's precious subordinates and the Dragon King's beloved daughters.

He must not allow them to die, not even a single one of them.

—And more importantly, he did not want Greyworth to kill them.

Probably taking in Kamito's message—

"May you be victorious, Kamito-dono—" "May the blessing of dragons be with you."

The dragon knight girls carried the collapsed Leonora and retreated into the castle.

"—Thanks."

Kamito said quietly then turned to Greyworth again, who was standing in front of the cliff.

"You're hoping for a one on one, right?"

"A life-risking decision."

Greyworth remarked calmly.

Then suddenly, the wind stopped.

Under the moonlit night upon a bridge, the Dusk Witch and the Strongest Blade Dancer faced off.

"Say, Greyworth..."

"What now?"

"Is there no way to reconcile? Have you really forgotten me and the others?"

Kamito tried persuasion one last time.

However, with a merciless expression, the girl said:

"Talk is cheap. It kills the mood."

"I see..."

Kamito shook his head and infused maximum divine power into the Demon Slayer.

"Est, we're going all-out right from the start. Can you keep up?"

'Yes, I am your sword, your wish is my command.'

Est replied firmly.

The two faced off. However, neither side moved recklessly. Having mastered the same style, it meant that both sides fully understood each other's movements. Every motion of every move would presumably be predicted by the other side, thereby bringing forth a counterattack.

Hence, they needed to simulate countless battles in their minds to search for the most effective way to attack.

Then—

The first to begin the battle was Kamito.

"Absolute Blade Arts, First Form—Purple Lightning!"

Raising the sacred sword shining with silver-white light, Kamito kicked the ground in a leap, accelerating explosively using the release of divine power. The thrust was like lightning, surpassing the speed of sound to pierce the enemy.

Clang—A scatter of sparks.

Kamito's deadly strike was parried away by Greyworth's blade.

This was not reaction but prediction.

Kamito immediately withdrew his sword and executed a straight horizontal slash.

—However, Greyworth took half a step back, causing the sword tip to simply fly past her nose.

Kamito took another step forward. Chanting spirit magic rapidly, he manifested a dagger in his other hand. This was Weapon Works, steel-type magic—Holding the dagger between his fingers, he threw it.

The dagger flew with a flash, tearing through the air, but was shattered by a chop from Greyworth's bare hand, enveloped in divine power. Using her residual momentum, she struck at Kamito's neck.

This was within Kamito's prediction too. Thus lowering his stance to evade, he slashed diagonally upwards towards her shoulder. The crossing blades produced a shower of sparks.

This was super high-speed contest that ordinary people could not follow with the naked eye.

At close range, virtually with their faces pressed together, the two of them clashed.

"Your movements are different from that day's—"

"After all, I was wounded all over at the time."

"Is that so? How delightful."

Greyworth's lips fluttered slightly, murmuring something.

(Spirit magic? No—)

He relied purely on instinct. Sensing some kind of ominous presence, Kamito jumped back to create distance.

In that instant, the bloodstained demon sword transformed, turning into a gigantic lupine beast with countless fangs.

"...!?"

ROOOOOOAAAAAR...!

The blood-colored beast howled and pounced at Kamito.

Kamito dove to the ground and rolled, evading in the nick of time. His position from half a second ago was crushed by the jaws of the beast's head sprouting from her demon sword's hilt.

(...! What the heck is this—!?)

'Kamito, while turned into an elemental waffe, that demon sword retains its traits as a spirit.'

Est's voice sounded in his mind.

(So it's both an elemental waffe and a spirit at the same time. I see now—)

Kamito figured it out. Instead of dominating the demon spirit, Greyworth was in a cooperative relationship with it.

"One of the seventy-two sealed spirits, Vlad Dracul the demon spirit. Sure enough, it grows very fast when I allow it to absorb the blood of dragons."

Greyworth said contentedly.

"A blood-drinking demon sword huh? That's a bit creepy—"

However, given Greyworth's frightening sword skills combined with the demon sword's independent attacks, it was truly a difficult situation. To Kamito, this meant he had to predict attacks from two completely different styles at the same time.

"The demon sword is thirsting for your blood, Demon King—"

Greyworth swept the demon sword horizontally.

ROOOOOAAAAAR!

The beast head sprouted from the hilt gave a strange howl and chased Kamito relentlessly.

Jumping randomly all over the place, the beast crushed the remnants of the bridge.

(...Curse this spirit!)

Even with Steel's Protection, Kamito's body would probably be torn apart in an instant if it bit him.

However, it would not be realistic to keep running. Thinking he had to find a chance to strike back, Kamito kicked the ground to jump towards the bridge's railing.

A leap. In midair, Kamito turned around and released his divine power.

"Absolute Blade Dance, Second Form—Meteor!"

Divine power erupted explosively. While descending at extreme speed, Kamito swung his sword downwards.

This was a move derived from Purple Lighting. Its power was also top-notch within the Absolute Blade Arts.

The Demon Slayer pierced the beast's head, pinning its gigantic body to the ground.

Instantly, the blood-colored beast melted away and disappeared.

—However, just at that moment, Greyworth appeared before his eyes.

Part 2

Inside the throne room at the deepest part of the castle—

Through the eyes of flying dragon familiars, the Dragon King observed the situation outside.

The dragons of Kelbreth Mountain kept attacking the girl one after another and were cut down on the spot.

(That truly is the Dusk Witch huh...)

She had witnessed the girl's image in the past.

During the Ranbal War last time, hundreds of Dracunia's dragons had been slaughtered by merely one young girl. It was recorded in history as the Terrifying Dusk Nightmare.

However, that was decades ago. Supposed to have a limited lifespan, how could she still look as she did back then—?

Feeling an inexplicable sense of anxiety, she could not help but move. The Earth Elemental Lord's curse instantly reacted. The writhing vines restrained her naked body tightly.

Contemptible curse. Were it not for this curse, she would be able to head outside the castle personally. Turning a mere human girl to ash would be as easy as—

—At that moment...

"Fufu, you actually should have kept Ren Ashbell here as your bodyguard. I cannot believe you fell for it so easily—"

A young girl's voice sounded within the throne room in the Dragon King's presence.

It was accompanied by the sound of a bell. She had suddenly appeared out of the dark.

"Who goes there? I do not recall permitting anyone to have an audience—"

The Dragon King narrowed her crimson eyes and declared.

She never expected an intruder here. Due to sharing her senses with familiars outside, she must have overlooked that presence.

Hearing that, the maiden dressed in pure white vestments bowed politely.

"I am Millennia Sanctus, a cardinal from the Holy Kingdom of Lugia—"

"Is that so? The Holy Kingdom's—"

The Dragon King smiled.

"I thought all they could manage were conspiracies and ploys. Who would have thought that they would grow so brazen day by day... Well then, what is your purpose in sneaking into my bedroom? Depending on the specific reason, no, regardless of the reason, your sin deserves a thousand deaths."

The Dragon King glared haughtily at the girl in vestments. An ordinary person would have fainted from such an intimidating gaze—

However, Millennia remained unfazed.

"I came to take your life, Dragon King of Dracunia."

"..."

Hearing that, the Dragon King fell silent for a moment—

Next, she showed a terrifying and magnificent smile.

"Oh? To think that you are targeting the life of I, Bahamut, the ultimate dragon spirit, now that is truly getting carried away."

The wind rumbled. The Dragon King's tranquil fury was shaking the air.

"Although my original power is sealed under a curse, I still possess sufficient power to destroy the likes of you—"

Instantly, balls of lightning appeared in the Dragon King's surroundings to penetrate the the girl's body.

The girl did not even have enough time to scream.

All that remained on the ground was the girl's charred outline.

Nothing was left of the cardinal Millennia Sanctus. Vanished from this world without a trace.

"Foolish girl. Acting impudently without considering our difference in power."

The Dragon King sighed.

However, in the next instant—

"Fufu, as expected of the great Dragon King. *You even killed one of me*."

"...!?"

The Dragon King widened her eyes in surprise.

Only to see the girl who had been eliminated just now—

As though seeping out from the darkness in the air, she reappeared.

"What are you—"

Millennia unfastened the eye patch over her left eye.

From her eye socket, the Otherworldly Darkness seeped out, crawling towards the Dragon King's throne.

"Otherworldly Darkness!? I see, you are *neither human nor spirit*—!"

"Well observed—"

Millennia smiled tenderly.

"But you are too late—"

Part 3

Holding the demon sword, Greyworth appeared right before his eyes.

At the same time, multiple crimson spears appeared out of thin air, shooting at Kamito together.

Fourteen spears created from spirit magic. Kamito immediately read the spears' trajectories. However—

(...I can't dodge them all!?)

Making a split-second decision, he sacrificed his right shoulder which was very unlikely to become a critical wound.

"Gah...!"

The spiraling spear tip pierced him. Taking the opportunity of Kamito's loss of posture, Greyworth swung the demon sword.

Kamito hastily stabbed the Demon Slayer into the ground. Clang—The demon sword struck the upright sacred sword's flat of the blade.

In that instant, Kamito poured in divine power—

(Est, Mode Shift!)

'Yes, Kamito—'

Instantly, the silver-white blade became dominated by darkness. The Demon Slayer turned into the Demon King's Sword that had inherited Restia's power.

"Go forth and pierce, all-annihilating demon lightning of punishment—Vorpal Blast!"

The black lightning released by the Demon King's Sword hit Greyworth directly while the blades clashed. Her petite body was blown away violently.

Kamito followed up on the attack. Drawing out the Demon King's Sword from the ground, he charged all at once.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhh!"

He swung with god-like speed, aiming at Greyworth's shoulder just as she did a somersault in the air to land on the ground.

However, he did not feel the strike connecting. She vanished instantly like a mirage.

"...!?"

"Absolute Blade Arts, Mist Form—Water Reflection Mirror."

What Kamito had slashed was an afterimage formed from divine power.

(Where—)

Kamito was confused for an instant. Even though it was an opening for only a few milliseconds, in a contest between those who had reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship, it was enough to be fatal.

Greyworth was *directly behind* the wavering image. Almost superimposed with the image, she had dodged Kamito's slash by leaning her upper body back for an instant.

(Crap—!)

Greyworth kicked Kamito's sword. While his posture was severely off-balance—

"Absolute Blade Arts, Flash Form—Death Butterfly Flash Dance!"

She counterattacked with godlike speed.

Kamito barely managed to react, escaping the lethal strike aimed straight at his heart. Rather than reading the attack, this was a subconscious reaction only possible due to his extreme familiarity with that move from the Absolute Blade Arts.

Had he not experienced that move many times in his youth, he would be surely be dead now.

His arm, the one wielding the Demon King's Sword, bled.

—At this moment, probably reacting to the fresh blood, the demon sword, Vlad Dracul, instantly twisted its blade, turning into a bloodthirsty beast to bite Kamito's arm.

"...!"

A tearing bite inflicted to his right arm. The instant before the nerves in his sword arm died, Kamito poured divine power into the Demon Slayer. The Demon King's Sword vanished as particles of light and appeared on the other side, his left hand, as the dagger of pure white out of the twin blades.

He instantly used the dagger to slice off the beast's head. Next, the demon spirit Vlad Dracul returned to its demon sword form.

(...Gah, my right arm is completely dead huh—)

Kicking the ground hard, Kamito jumped back.

While creating as much distance as he could, he assessed the damage to his body.

Although his right arm was still sort of attached after being bitten by the beast, the network of nerves had lost contact. He could not even lift a single finger.

Greyworth jumped up high.

Then from the air, she unleashed an Absolute Blade Art—

"Absolute Blade Arts, Second Form—Meteor!"

"Absolute Blade Arts, Seventh Form—Biting Dragon!"

At the same time, Kamito held the white dagger in a reverse grip to counter the aerial Absolute Blade Art.

The blades clashed violently in the air. The divine power released from the two of them glowed with brightness like the sun.

The Dusk Witch and Ren Ashbell—This blade dance between the two elementalists idolized as ideals by princess maidens across the entire continent was far too destructive to be called a blade dance.

(...Gah, I'm getting overpowered—!)

The anti-air Absolute Blade Art, Biting Dragon, was delivered imperfectly with one hand. Despite reducing the Meteor's power, it failed to counter it. Thus, Kamito was cut down on the ground.

"Kaha—!"

The impact felt like it would shatter his spine, making him split blood violently. Greyworth withdrew her sword in midair and swung the demon sword, aiming at Kamito's heart—

(—Damn... it, I... can't win...?)

Unable to breathe, he could not even lift a finger—

Under his blurred vision, he quietly waited for the blade to pierce his heart—

Just then...

Kamito heard Leonora's voice in his mind.

—*I am begging you*... Protect the Dragon King, protect Dracunia.

(...Right... I, already, promised—!)

Throb—His heart pulsated powerfully.

—It was the warning sign of *that* coming.

Throb, throb, throb, throb—

The divine power circulating inside him began to flow in reverse while black miasma leaked out of his entire body. Sealed inside Kamito, Ren Ashdoll's power began to provide unlimited divine power—

Clang—!

Kamito blocked the downward slash *with his sword in one hand*.

"What—"

Greyworth exclaimed in surprise for the first time.

"A sudden expansion of divine power?"

'Kamito, this is bad, that power—!'

Est's strained voice echoed in his mind.

(Yeah, I know. This power has very bad consequences—)

If this power of Ren Ashdoll's devoured him completely, Kamito's personality would be destroyed, turning him into a monster like Nepenthes Lore. Either that, or a Demon King would be reborn to bring destruction and chaos to the world—

However, Kamito had to defeat the Dusk Witch right now—

(I need this power—)

'Kamito...!'

(Est, I'm sorry—)

Est's voice gradually faded and soon could not be heard.

At the same time, he felt his divine power *reverse* all at once.

Black miasma gushed out intensely, instantly regenerating all his wounds and the torn right arm.

Probably sensing some kind of danger instinctively, Greyworth jumped back.

Kamito released divine power, changed the Demon Slayer's form and jumped all at once.

A bestial roar was emitted from Kamito's throat.

With all senses tensed to the limit, he felt an illusion as if his entire body had plunged into a kind of time stop.

Greyworth made some kind of sound. Instantly, the demon sword Vlad Dracul turned into a pack of blood-colored wolves to pounce at Kamito.

However, Kamito did not halt.

Allowing them to bite and rip flesh from his entire body, he lunged into the wolf pack.

Then he charged at Greyworth in one breath—

"Absolute Blade Arts, Destructive Form—Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance - Eighteen Consecutive Strikes!"

He unleashed the strongest anti-spirit Absolute Blade Art—

However, the instant the first strike approached the witch's throat—

Greyworth smiled.

(No way—!?)

Indeed, against this sword technique that was capable of slaughtering even an archdemon-class spirit, there was one and only one counterattack.

It was the ultimate secret of the Absolute Blade that could only be performed by someone who had reached the pinnacle of both divine power and swordsmanship.

Having returned to her peak form, right now, she was able to use it!

"Absolute Blade Arts, Final Form—Last Strike!"

In front of Kamito's eyes, the sword flashed faster than godlike speed.

Part 4

"Is this as far as your flames can go—?"

"...!?"

Every time Rubia Elstein swung Laevateinn, a blazing torrent of fire rushed over the wildnerness.

The flames turned into scorching walls, slowly cornering the fleeing Claire.

(Such powerful heat, my flames can't compare at all...!)

Faced with Rubia's sword swings, Claire unleashed Flametongue but all her attacks were easily deflected.

Sweat appeared on Claire's forehead. Burning anxiety and fear was spreading. Although she knew in her heart that this was a hallucination displayed to her by the ancient historical site...

(—If that fire were to burn me, my mind will be destroyed even if my body remains unharmed.)

Claire sensed this instinctively. Most likely, this place was similar to Astral Zero in structure. A single misstep and she might not be able to return to the original world.

"Claire Rouge, why do you pursue power?"

Rubia spoke from behind the mask.

"Th-That's to... meet Nee-sama—"

Mid-sentence, Claire stopped.

Indeed, she was still very weak. Having been protected by her older sister or Rinslet all the time, she definitely hoped to become strong for this purpose. It was for this that she had set the Blade Dance as her goal.

However, now that she had achieved that goal, why was it still necessary for her to pursue power?

Rubia chanted an incantation to release a two-headed flaming hound.

Flame magic did not work on that hound.

(...Humm, in that case, try this!)

"—O true flame carved upon the ancient bloodline, dwell in my hand to *devour flames*!"

Claire composed spell words with her lips.

What appeared in her hand was fire redder and more intense than burning flames.

Capable of incinerating flames—End of Vermilion.

Faced with the pouncing hound of flame, Claire turned it into ash using the True Flame.

"I am fighting so that I can stay by Kamito's side!"

Claire shouted.

Yes, she hoped to obtain power sufficient to become Kamito's partner, to fight alongside him.

That was the reason why Claire currently sought power.

"Oh?"

Wielding Laevateinn, Rubia suddenly approached before her eyes.

(...When did she!?)

Claire trembled, The flaming hound was a diversion.

"—F-Fireball!"

While jumping back, Claire released her prided spirit magic at pointblank range.

However—

"Experience my icy wrath—Frost Blaze!"

The blue flame appearing in Rubia's hand froze the fireball spirit magic together with space itself.

(Impossible...!)

Claire was shocked.

"Then answer me. Why do you wish to stay by Kazehaya Kamito's side?"

"—Huh?"

Claire was confused. Why did she want to stay by Kamito's side—?

"Uh, th-that's because, Kamito has always protected me. I am his master after all, so it's unfair if I can't protect him, uh—"

...No, that was wrong—Claire shook her head.

The true reason was—

"Until the day you admit to your true feelings, the flames of Elstein will never acknowledge you."

"True feelings?"

"Discard your mindset of self-deception, Claire Rouge. Otherwise, you shall die here—"

Rubia swung down the blazing Laevateinn.

Chapter 9 - Vorpal Sword

Part 1

Last Strike—This was the Absolute Blade's final secret technique that Greyworth had risked her life to entrust to Kamito.

It was an ultimate countering skill that reversed the flow of divine power to strike the enemy directly.

With the Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance's force returned to him, Kamito was blown into the air.

The only reason why his body had not been torn into two was thanks to him noticing the activation of Last Strike in the nick of time, thus allowing him to put up a twin sword defensive stance. Without having experienced her ultimate skill firsthand before, it would have been impossible to read this move.

Tracing out a parabolic trajectory in the air, Kamito's body smashed hard against the stone floor.

"...Ack... Huff—!"

A diagonal slash was left on his torso from his waist up to his shoulder, bleeding profusely. His ribs were shattered beyond recognition, preventing him from even breathing.

The black miasma crawled all over Kamito's body as though licking him, causing regeneration at astounding speed. However, it still could not keep up.

Greyworth quietly lowered her bloodstained demon sword. Even the Dusk Witch could not help but pant. The drawback to the Last Strike was its extreme strain on the body. After executing the move, it was impossible to move for a short time.

—That being said, she probably still had enough strength remaining to deliver the final blow to Kamito in his battered state then fight the Knights of the Dragon Emperor in the castle.

(...Damn, it... Can't, I win...?)

Even though he wanted to grip his twin swords, his fingers could not move.

Holding the demon sword, Greyworth slowly approached.

"It was quite delightful, Demon King—"

—At that very moment...

His leather-gloved left hand felt a slight pain.

...Kami...to...Are you, there...?

It was not Est's voice.

Neither was it Ren Ashdoll's voice, enticing him towards darkness.

It was *her* voice.

(...Are you Restia?)

Kamito concentrated completely on the voice in his mind.

The spirit seal gave off scorching heat and the erupting black lightning instantly destroyed the leather glove.

Glowing intensely, the seal of the black moon, symbolizing darkness, was flashing.

"...Ah... Guh...!"

...Kamito, I am here, waiting for you, the whole time...

(Restia—!)

Calling her name again in his heart, in that instant—

Kamito's consciousness plunged into darkness.

Part 2

The strongest flames in the human realm—Laevateinn's conflagration was approaching Claire.

Isolated by the walls of flame surrounding her, there was no way to escape.

And dying in this world entailed the death of the soul in the real world.

"...!"

It was impossible to resist using spirit magic or Scarlet's flames. Claire hastily extended her hands and chanted the incantation.

"O true flame carved upon the ancient bloodline, dwell in my hand to *devour flames*!"

The flames of termination, more intense than blazing crimson flames, clashed violently against Laevateinn's godslaying blaze.

"...Guh... Urgh...!"

...However, she could not block it.

The endless and overwhelming flames were slowly devouring Claire's own flames.

—Until the day you admit to your true feelings, the flames of Elstein will never acknowledge you.

Rubia's words replayed in her mind.

(...W-What, my true feelings...!)

Was she overlooking what she truly felt?

(Why am I pursuing power...?)

While scorched by the heat from the blazing flames, Claire engaged in introspection.

Her initial goal was to take part in the Blade Dance so that she could meet her sister again.

To this end, she had attempted to obtain power beyond her control and failed.

The one who persuaded her at the time and taught her to fight in a team was *him*.

(Purely pursuing power will only repeat the same mistakes...)

Claire realized in alarm and bit her lip.

(But what should I do—?)

The true feelings she was avoiding. Only by understanding them—

"Do you think flames of this level can stop my fury and my lamentation!?"

Rubia's flames surged and howled. There was no way for Claire to endure further—!

—At that very moment.

At her feet, Scarlet meowed and ran forward to protect Claire.

"Scarlet! No, even if you're a flame spirit, that Laevateinn's godslaying flames will—"

—Please liberate me, master.

(...Huh?)

Claire heard a girl's calm voice in her mind.

...A voice she had no recollection of. However, it felt extremely familiar for some reason—

Claire looked down at Scarlet at her feet.

"Scarlet... Is that you?"

Scarlet meowed again and expelled intense flames.

Rubia's howling flames were forced back slightly.

During the Blade Dance, Claire had seen Scarlet's true form. If she could liberate her, perhaps it might be possible to oppose these flames. However—

"...How do I liberate you!?"

—Please liberate your genuine feelings, master.

"...My genuine feelings?"

Claire was confused.

Even at other's urging, she still did not know what to do.

(Also, what the heck is with genuine feelings...!?)

The flames surged with greater intensity. Claire's power was not going to hold.

The True Flame of Elstein—End of Vermilion—was not only consuming her divine power mercilessly but also her stamina and mental strength...

"...Ah, urgh...!"

Her body felt very heavy. Her forehead was sweating profusely while her consciousness gradually grew hazy. She might lose consciousness before the flames burned her. Perhaps that was a sliver of kindness afforded to her from her sister. That was what she thought.

However, at that moment, what surfaced in her mind was Kamito's face.

(...No way, how can I die in a place like this!?)

Scolding her weak self, she mustered the last of her strength.

Claire closed her eyes and focused on her own heart.

Hoping to stand by Kamito's side—This wish was real.

However, why would she wish for that...?

An inferiority complex due to her weakness—No.

Because she was worried about Kamito—That was not totally correct.

(Kamito, I...)

Throb. Her heart pulsated.

—Please be more honest, master.

...Right, even though it is clear in my heart.

However, these feelings, she had always kept them hidden using all sorts of ways.

Even though she had admitted them long ago, she was still afraid to voice them.

She was afraid of becoming honest.

(Like that, I am hiding my genuine feelings, deceiving my own heart...)

The contracted spirit was an existence tightly connected to the depths of an elementalist's heart. No matter how much experience as an elementalist was accumulated, no matter how powerful the divine power possessed—

With her heart under such conditions, how could the contracted spirit possibly respond to her?

(...I-I know, I'll just have to admit it!)

Amid blazing flames—

"I-I—"

Claire took a breath forcefully.

"I, love, Kamitooooooooooooo!"

Blushing to her ears, she yelled loudly.

Indeed, Claire Rouge loved Kazehaya Kamito.

Hence, that was why she wished to obtain power allowing her to stand by Kamito's side.

These were Claire's genuine feelings, not covered up, not an excuse.

—You finally became honest, master.

"...!?"

A violent surge of flames enveloped Scarlet's entire body—

Then what appeared was—

A young girl with long fluttering hair of flames.

Her burning eyes were redder than rubies. The flames wrapped around her limbs howled nonstop.

"Scarlet...?"

Claire whispered in shock.

"The Scarlet Valkyrie—Ortlinde—has descended upon the world in response to the call for my true name."

The girl with crimson hair extended her hand at the approaching flames.

The flames around the girl's entire body instantly surged violently.

"In response to my master's command, I hereby present my true power. Crimson flames of the lion—!"

The instant Ortlinde called out...

The crimson blaze surging from her entire body—

Engulfed Rubia and Laevateinn.

Part 3

(...This is place is?)

After his consciousness was interrupted...

Kamito found himself in darkness.

It was that place which he had seen many times in his dreams.

The spirit seal on his left hand was glowing, slightly illuminating the dark.

...Now, Kamito was able to understand.

This was no dream. Instead, it was the world where Restia was located.

Through the bond of the spirit contract, she had summoned Kamito's consciousness to this place—

Kamito searched in the dark.

"Restia! Where are you, Restia!?"

The sticky and viscous darkness swallowed his body.

"...! Restia!"

While brushing darkness away, Kamito moved forward.

Suddenly, the figure of the maiden with folded wings of jet-black appeared in the dark.

"Restia!"

Inside the mud-like darkness, Kamito strove to move forward.

His entire body was attacked by pain as though scorched. However, he did not stop. How could he possibly stop? She was in this dark and lonely place, waiting for him the whole time.

Finally, he reached out and grabbed Restia's arm firmly.

"I've been waiting for you, Kamito—"

Restia smiled.

"...I'm sorry, took me long enough."

Surrounded by endless darkness, the two pressed their lips together as one.

It was their second spirit contract—

Restia's jet-black wings moved to surround Kamito.

Part 4

"...A-Ahhhhhhhhhhh....!"

Terrifying darkness was crawling over the pale complexion of the maiden's naked body.

Violated as a spirit, the feeling of being defiled was making the Dragon King struggle violently.

Able to endure the passage of thousands of years despite being trapped by the Earth Elemental Lord's curse, her resilient mind was now being painted with a coating of blackness.

"Fufu, your cries are surprisingly cute, Your Majesty—"

"Damn... you... Ah... Guh..."

Any other spirit would probably have gone mad already. However, as expected of a mythical-class spirit, she still barely clung onto her sanity.

"As expected of the strongest dragon spirit. However, how long can you last?"

After Millennia smiled sadistically—

She cast her gaze towards the sleeping Restia, cradled among branches and vines.

"To think that I would be able to take this darkness spirit too, my lord shall be pleased—"

"...Stop... She is—"

"Fufu, just enjoy the show from over there, Your Majesty—"

Millennia Sanctus reached out to Restia.

At that very instant...

Just as her finger made contact, black lightning exploded. Millennia's expression became twisted.

"...!?"

The released lightning of darkness attacked Millennia repeatedly.

Millennia instantly moved to evade, landing at the entrance of the hall.

"...! You—"

"...You are too naughty, Millenia Sanctus."

Easily incinerating the vines to nothing, Restia slowly stood up.

Her entire body was enveloped in black lightning—

In the next instant, she was clad in a dress of darkness.

Her gorgeous jet-black wings were spread out.

Opening her dusk-colored eyes slightly, she stared coldly at Millennia.

"Restia Ashdoll, you..."

Millennia's eyes widened in surprise.

"You deserve to die ten thousand times for daring to touch me."

"...! Take this—"

Millennia launched holy spirit magic.

However, the glowing arrow of holy light was deflected by Restia's jet-black wing.

"...! Why!? Aren't you a darkness spirit's minion—"

"Fufu, don't you get it...?"

Restia smiled fearlessly and asked.

"...So what?"

With Otherworldly Darkness flowing out of her eye socket, Millennia lunged at Restia.

However—

"—That darkness is *already mine*."

Zo, zozozo, zozozozozozozozozo—

The Otherworldly Darkness produced by Millennia was absorbed into Restia's palm.

Even darkness capable of eating away at the Dragon King was erased inside her hand.

"...Don't tell me... Don't tell me *that is actually happening*?"

Millennia's face showed unprecedented shock.

"However, regarding this, my lord shall—"

Millennia bit her lip hard.

"Very well, I shall retreat for now. After all, there are things to confirm—"

As though devoured by darkness, she vanished into thin air.

"...She escaped."

Saying that, Restia slowly turned to face the Dragon King.

"...Your memories have recovered, Restia Ashdoll—"

The Dragon King groaned in pain.

"Dragon King Bahamut—I have not seen you since the Demon King War. Although I would like to catch up, I'm afraid I must go, he is calling for me—"

"Yes, be on your way—"

After bowing to the Dragon King, Restia vanished as particles of light.

...Leaving only jet-black feathers behind.

Part 5

"...Kuh... ugh..."

After the endless darkness dissipated, Kamito regained consciousness.

...It was not a dream. Through the seal on his left hand, he could sense her existence concretely.

(...She came back.)

Kamito's fingers gripped the two Demon King's Swords with precision.

(...Now is not the time to be lying down here!)

Thrusting the blades into the ground, Kamito slowly got up. Although his entire body was hurting intensely, it was not enough to make him lose consciousness. The black miasma covering his entire body gradually reconstituted Kamito's body—

"Oh? It wasn't deep enough huh—"

Greyworth halted in her steps and widened her eyes slightly.

"However, what can you do in that body?"

"..."

She was right. Although by using Ren Ashdoll's power, he was barely holding his body together, no matter how you looked at it, he was in no condition to swing swords.

However, even so—Kamito still stood up.

On his dangling left arm, the spirit seal on his hand was glowing with dazzling light.

...He could feel very palpably. She was there—

"A second spirit seal...?"

Greyworth frowned in surprise.

Kamito slowly raised his glowing left hand over his head.

Then he called her name—that of his past contracted spirit.

"Come, merciless queen of darkness, thy name is—the darkness spirit Restia Ashdoll!"

In that instant, the spirit seal on his left hand erupted with black lightning.

The lightning tore through the atmosphere, streaked across the night sky and disappeared.

In the next instant—

Beautiful jet-black wings opened up before Kamito's eyes.

The dress of darkness was fluttering magnificently in the wind.

Landing on tiptoe, she descended quietly.

"This appearance has been absent for so long, Kamito—"

Turning around, she smiled tenderly.

That mysteriously fearless smile was undoubtedly hers.

"Restia..."

Kamito called out the name as though chewing his words.

In order to rescue Kamito at the Elemental Lords' altar when the Otherworldly Darkness was about to devour him, she had sacrificed herself and vanished. All her power had been entrusted to Est—

And now, she had finally returned to Kamito's side.

"Your memories recovered..."

"Yes, thanks to her. It was originally supposed to take longer, so I must thank the Dragon King properly—"

Restia nodded and faced Greyworth.

"Although I have many things to say, let me save that to the end for now—"

"Ah, yes..."

Kamito and Restia faced off against Greyworth and her demon sword.

"You have become quite adorable, Dusk Witch. What an excellent opportunity, you've always rubbed me the wrong way since long ago—"

Restia smiled provocatively and released lightning from her palm.

In response, Greyworth deflected it with her demon sword—

"What a coincidence. Although this is my first time meeting you, for some reason, you rub me the wrong way too."

"Fufu, whether myself or Kamito, we are different from the way we were three years ago."

"H-Hey, Restia...!?"

Kamito felt troubled by the sparks flying between those two.

"Yes, understood—"

Restia stood up lightly on her toes.

"I am your sword, your wish is my command—"

In the next instant, Restia's body turned into particles of light and disappeared into thin air—

A demon sword with a blade of darkness immediately appeared upright in front of Kamito.

'—Please do not imitate me, darkness spirit.'

Est's voice sounded in Kamito's mind.

'Oh my, you are here too—'

Restia chuckled in response.

'Let's get along, *Onee-chan*.'

'Please do not sound so familiar, darkness spirit—'

...Kamito could not help but picture the two of them bickering.

'I am taking back the power entrusted to you, okay?'

Suddenly, of the twin swords, the black one disappeared from Kamito's left hand—

The Vorpal Sword standing before him began to exude an ominous aura of darkness.

The power of darkness inherited by Est had returned to Restia.

However, a question came to Kamito's mind. Just now, Restia had clearly released darkness spirit magic against Greyworth. Where on earth had that power come from—?

Kamito drew out the Vorpal Sword from the ground.

The hilt's grip felt extremely familiar and comfortable.

"Let's go, Restia and Est—"

'Alright.'

'Yes, Kamito—'

Kamito poured his entire body's divine power into the two swords he was wielding with two hands.

Ren Ashdoll's endless flow of power was gradually absorbed into the Vorpal Sword—

(...What is going on?)

'—Let me explain later, okay?'

The demon sword of darkness began to give off jet-black lightning.

It was far stronger than what Restia had before.

Isn't this power enough to rival Est's—?

"Oh? So you were hiding that kind of power?"

Greyworth readied the demon sword Vlad Dracul in both hands.

A stance of the Absolute Blade Arts. She intended to decide the match right here instead of enjoying a back and forth contest.

"Greyworth, I will return you to normal. I swear I will—"

Kamito crossed his two swords in a stance.

For Kamito, this was a final strike in the truest sense.

Merely milliseconds. After the passage of the brief instant that felt like eternity—

The two of them moved at the same time.

"Absolute Blade Dance, First Form—Purple Lightning!"

Greyworth was the one with a sword flash of crimson light.

This was the most basic of the Absolute Blade Arts, the fastest sword technique.

When pitting the same move against each other, this was the one technique that best demonstrated the gap between both sides' skill level. At the same time, it was the only move in the Absolute Blade Arts for which there was no effective counter.

Pouring all of his remaining divine power into the soles of his feet, Kamito accelerated in one go.

The Vorpal Sword in his left hand released powerful lightning.

As though competing, the Demon Slayer in his right hand glowed with dazzling light at the same time.

Finally, that instant arrived.

The swords of the Dusk Witch and Ren Ashbell, the Strongest Blade Dancer, flew past each other. In that very instant...

Kamito released his two crossed swords.

"Absolute Blade Arts, Dual Wielding Form—Purple Lightning Revised!"

The flash of the two swords clashed violently against Greyworth's demon sword—

And shattered the crimson blade.

Afterword

—You're thinking too much like a dragon!

Shimizu here. To readers who are holding this book, I am truly grateful.

Let me present to you the 15th installment of *Seirei Tsukai no Blade Dance*, The Dragon King of Dracunia.

Infiltrating the imperial capital to rescue Fianna, Kamito was blocked by Greyworth who had recovered her appearance as a young girl. With Kamito helpless in the face of her overwhelming power, it was at that moment when Leonora the dragon knight of Dracunia showed up—

That's how Leonora entered the stage again because there have been no opportunities since the Blade Dance. Leonora is really quite a dragon, carnivorous in all kinds of ways. Also, in this volume, the Dragon Duchy of Dracunia that has been shrouded in mystery has finally lifted its veil. The truth about the Dragon King ruling over the Dragon Duchy of Dracunia turns out to be—!?

As for acknowledgements, again, I am truly thankful to Nimura Yuuji-sensei for his magnificent illustrations. Leonora's "not wearing any" picture on the cover is really too awesome. (The bare legs version appearing on the frontispiece was due to the my insistence as the author!) There is also the illustration of the new character, the Dragon King, which truly surpassed my imagination.

Then there is Hyouju Issei-sensei's manga serialization. Every time, it is drawn to such high standards, I am honestly extremely grateful. The latest Volume 5 will be released in February so I do hope that everyone could check it if they have a chance. The battle between Kamito and Jio Inzagi is honestly very hot-blooded.

Editor in charge, S-sama, sorry for causing trouble for you on the schedule side. Thank you so much for supporting me every time.

Now about recent events. At this stage, I've written a collaborative scenario for SEGA's smartphone game, Chain Chronicle. It comes with original characters as freebies, so interested gamers, please try it out.

As for the customary popularity poll, according to Volume 14's survey, Restia and Est occupied the number one and number two spots respectively, separated by an extremely small gap. Third was Fianna. From the letters and comments in the survey responses, I can tell that everyone is reading the story very seriously. I truly cannot express my endless gratitude enough to everyone who has supported me so far.

—Well then, next comes the Theocracy episode where we will start tying up dangling plot threads.

Let us meet again with Volume 16, "The Demon King Returns in Triumph"!

Illustrator's Afterword

This time, Scarlet is taking a break.

Sorry for submitting things the last minute before the deadline...

Nimura